

Am I Actually the STRONGEST?

2

Sai Sumimori
Art by Ai Takahashi



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I CONJURE
A BALL AND
TOSS IT INTO
THE TABULAR
BARRIER IN
FRONT OF ME.
THE BALL PASS-
ES THROUGH
MYSTERY
SPACE-TIME
AND FLIES OUT
OF THE OTHER
BARRIER.

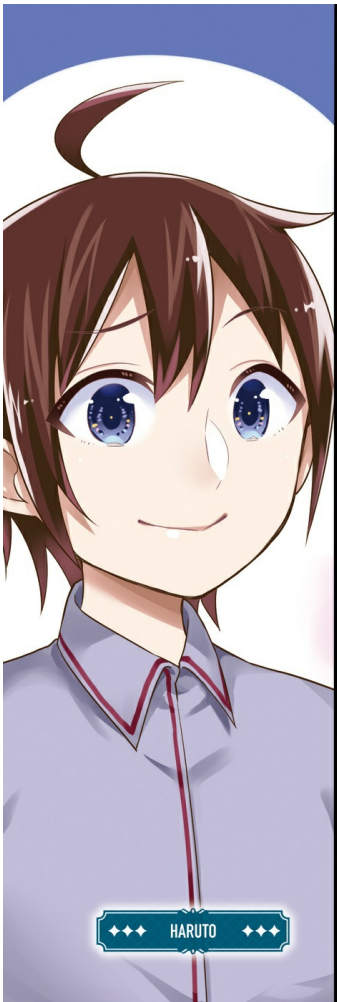
**"WH-WH-
WHOA!"**

FLAY
SCRAMBLES
TO CATCH IT.

"SEE?
I'VE ALREADY
TESTED AND
PROVED THAT
IT WORKS EVEN
WHEN THE
PORTALS ARE
FAR APART."

◆◆◆ CHARLOTTE ◆◆◆

◆◆◆ FLAY ◆◆◆

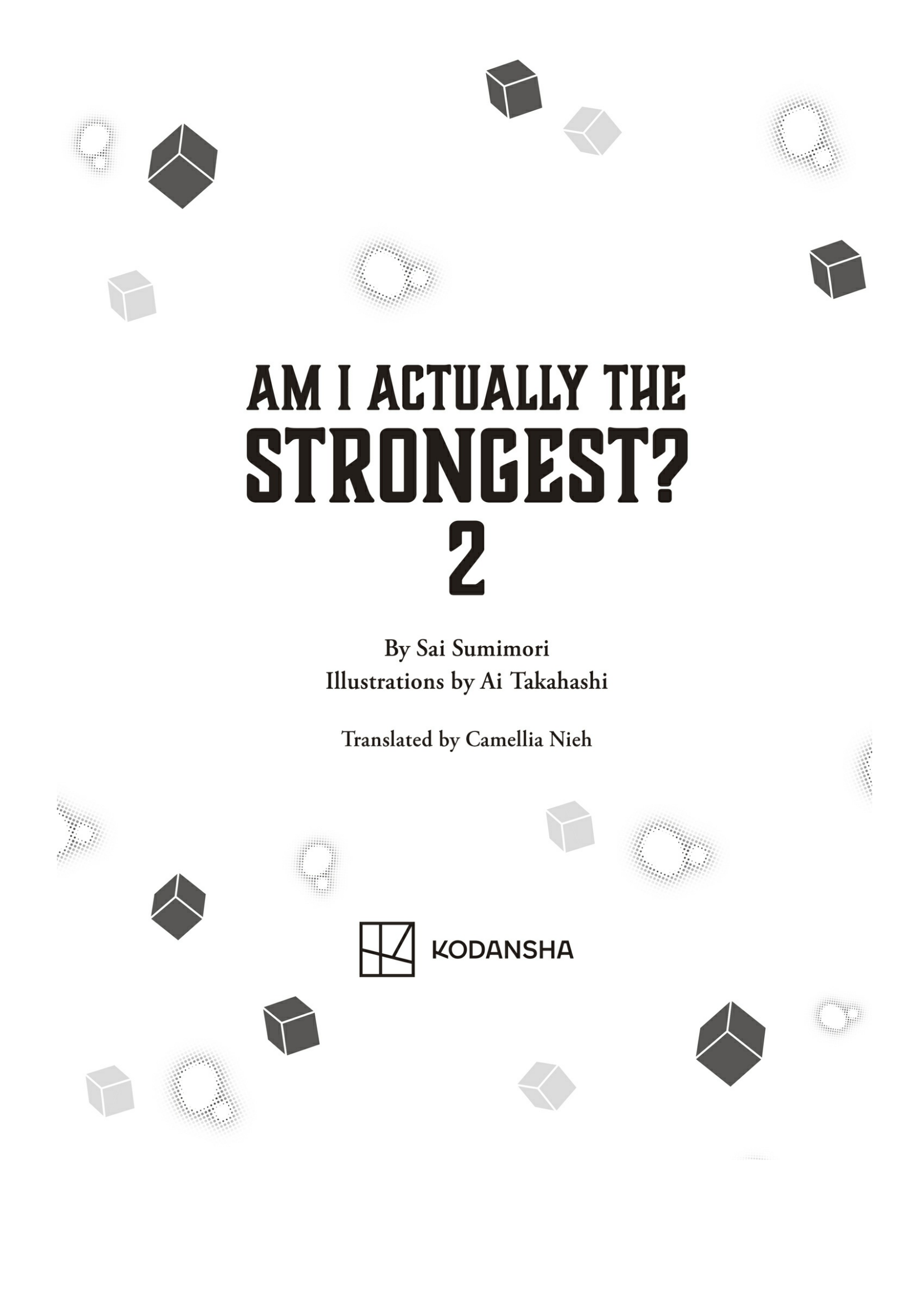




"I AM THE HERO
OF THE SHADOWS,
THE HARBINGER OF
JUSTICE RISING
FROM THE DARKNESS.
THE BLACK KNIGHT!
ALSO KNOWN AS
SHIVA."

"YOU...YOU CLOWN!
HOW DID YOU GET
INTO MY CHAMBER?"

"WHO
ARE YOU?!"

The cover is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes, some containing a small cube. These elements are scattered across the white background.

AM I ACTUALLY THE STRONGEST? 2

By Sai Sumimori
Illustrations by Ai Takahashi

Translated by Camellia Nieh



KODANSHA

Am I Actually the Strongest? 2

A VERTICAL Book

Translation: Camellia Nieh

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Proofreading: Micah Q. Allen

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Design: **AFTERGLOW**
Illustrations: **Ai Takahashi**

The page is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes. These elements are scattered across the page, with some appearing in the top half and others in the bottom half, creating a symmetrical, abstract pattern around the central text.

CHAPTER ONE:
The Dragon Girl
Is a Quiet Girl

I'll spare you the details, but... No, wait. I shouldn't spare the details.

This is a chance to organize my thoughts.

I'm fourteen years old, going on fifteen. It's winter right now, just after New Year's.

I was reincarnated into this world as a prince with only a mana level of 2. My birth parents, the king and queen, decided that I was a useless peon and immediately abandoned me in the woods. I was then taken in by Count Gold Zenfis, who's a blood relative of the king. Now, as the adopted child of an aristocratic family, I'm striving to establish a comfortable shut-in life in this alternate world. The only magic I can use is this weirdo Barrier magic, but it's turning out to be super nifty.

In fact, it's so nifty that I'm able to connect to the internet in modern-day Japan and watch all the anime I want. I lead a pretty enjoyable life, hanging out with my adoptive sister while doing superhero gigs on the side.

One snowy day, my dad casually drops a massive bomb on me as if he's asking for a quick grocery run.

"Come spring, I want you to begin your education at the capital school."

No. Absolutely no way. Absolutely, positively, not happening!

School—the place that made me miserable in my previous life—is the most cursed, dreadful word to me. It's nothing short of hell on earth.

So with ironclad determination, I decide to launch Operation Hell No, I Won't Go!

That basically sums up the story until now.

There. My thoughts are organized.

My dad hasn't been making me do swordplay training or much of anything lately, so I'm caught off guard by his request. As the son of nobility (even if I am adopted), I know I'm expected to have a certain level of education by now.

But I've been exempt from that all this time. Either my parents don't have high hopes for me, or they've been letting me have my freedom. It feels like the latter.

So this is a bolt from the blue.

I vehemently refuse, but my dad isn't backing down.

We move the conversation into his office, where he sets about trying to coax me.

He hunkers down at his desk as I stand before him.

"I'll say it again. Come spring, I want you to enroll in the school at the royal capital," my dad pronounces in earnest, but I can see the distress in his furrowed brow.

"I refuse."

No matter how many times he asks, my answer is the same. My will of steel is unbreakable.

"Hmph... When we tried to have you join the local school, too, you'd put up quite the resistance. On why you're so opposed to school, I won't probe. But this time, there's a reason I simply cannot yield."

My dad presents a folded sheet of paper.

I approach him warily and take it...and read it. Part of it, anyway.

“A letter of recommendation?” I lose my cool. “From the king? The king himself nominated me...?”

I feel nauseous.

That old scumbag! He cast me off like garbage without even a hint of remorse, and now he’s trying to make me suffer again?

“I know not why King Jilq has set his sights on you. Perhaps he suspects your true iden... Er, I mean, it’s odd, isn’t it? He knows you come from a common family.”

My mom and dad are the only ones who know that I’m the former prince who was abandoned at birth. Well, them and Flay. My parents never brought it up to me, so I’m not supposed to know.

I’ve always kept the royal insignia on the left side of my chest hidden. Flay can be kind of clueless and scatterbrained sometimes, but she’s never screwed up on serious matters, like leaking secret information.

Nobody’s figured it out, so how could the king?

Who would try to stand in the way of my comfortable reclusive life?

“The only possibility I can imagine is—” My dad begins to muse.

Whoever it is, I’ll never forgive them.

“—Princess Marianne.”

My older sister?! She seemed so nice, but is she actually a calculative crook? I’m a little appalled.

“The princess is one of the few people who hold your talent in high regard. The letter also mentions that Prince Laius will skip a grade to enroll, too. It says here, ‘It is my wish that these young men hone their skills together, and that they may contribute to the prosperity of the kingdom.’ In other words, it sounds like he wants you to befriend the prince.”

Friend? Yeah, with his bratty personality, I’ll bet he doesn’t have a lot of those. Then again, he’s a prince, so he’ll probably find some bootlickers to latch onto him. There were guys like that in my previous life, too.

But I doubt this is about being Laius’s friend.

“Does that mean the letter of recommendation is from the princess?”

“The king does dote on his daughter, Marianne. His relationship with Prince Laius is strained, but if this nomination was at the request of his daughter, your speculation makes sense. I doubt he could refuse her.”

Why would my sister want me to go to school?

According to the letter, the school is the top magic academy in the kingdom. Is she pushing me to earn high social status? If I look at it in a positive light, she could mean well, but...I don’t know.

“I won’t pretend I’m not concerned. Queen Gizelotte has been keeping a low profile lately. But there’s always the possibility that she’s scheming about something, and, with her devious ways, has steered the princess into doing this. However...”

The corners of my dad’s eyes soften slightly.

“I do want you to see more of the world. I don’t mind you being sheltered in your room and devoting yourself to Ancient Magic studies. But this is an opportunity to meet many people, to be inspired by new ideas, and to broaden

your perspective. The Royal Academy does have an Ancient Magic research lab, I recall.”

Ancient Magic? Oh, right—Dad thinks I’m researching Ancient Magic. But what I’m really studying is Barrier magic, the most basic of modern magic. The only magic I’ve got.

I am a bit curious about Ancient Magic, though. There seem to be commonalities between it and my Barrier magic. But...a research lab? Based on my age, I was imagining a high school, but this place sounds more like a university.

“If I refuse, will it get you in trouble?” I ask.

“I’m afraid so. If the princess was the one who orchestrated the letter, I doubt she means any harm. But officially, it’s an invitation from the king. To refuse it, I would have to lie. And if the deception were to be exposed, there would be consequences.”

I figured. What the heck is my big sis thinking?

“Fine...I’ll go.”

My dad’s been nothing but good to me. I don’t want to cause him any more trouble.

My will of steel has broken. Operation Hell No, I Won’t Go! lasted less than an hour. Alas...

Welp, it’s not like I don’t have a gameplan!

“I appreciate it,” my dad says. “Immerse yourself in your studies. I look forward to seeing your growth. Also, one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Because you were admitted by recommendation, you’ll be exempt from the entrance exam. I doubt you’ll be measured—since you’ve already achieved your max mana level—but...”

“Stay away from Mija’s Crystal? Got it.”

My mana level is public information. But the fact that I’m born without an affinity to any elements, which is a very rare case, is a secret. Mija’s Crystal can measure both mana level and elemental affinity. If anyone uses it on me, they’ll find out the truth.

And from that piece of information, I could be suspected of being the former prince. Don’t want that.

It’s okay, though. I have a gameplan for that, too.

“One day,” my dad says, “I will explain to you why your lack of elemental affinity cannot be publicized. But for now, please trust me.”

“I told you, Dad. That doesn’t bother me. I’ll play it safe. Plus, I still have some time before the school’s entrance ceremony, right?”

“About three months. You’ll have ample time to prepare. Ah, speaking of which...”

His next words leave me befuddled:

“You must choose an attendant.”

“An attendant? I have to bring someone with me?”

“It isn’t strictly required, but living alone in an unfamiliar environment won’t be easy. You should have at least one attendant to see to your basic needs, so that you may focus on your studies.”

It’s an exclusive school for kids from aristocratic families. Apparently, their

regulations permit students to bring along an attendant.

An attendant... Huh. The first person who comes to mind is that dog-eared maid.

“Not Flay, though,” he says.

“I figured.”

She is a demon, after all.

We pass her off as a half-demon here at the castle, and her fellow servants have grown to accept her. But a mere decade ago, humans and demons were slaughtering each other in a bloody war. If a demon were seen roaming freely within the capital, it'd be bound to cause a public stir.

There are ways I could hide her demon traits, but honestly, the thought of bringing her along causes me nothing but anxiety. She's highly competent, overall. But the few flaws she has make her a total liability.

“Haruto, you rarely associate with anyone but Charlotte and Flay. The decision is yours, but perhaps I should gather a few candidates for you to choose from.”

No way. Living with a total stranger would be suffocating. The servants at the castle aren't exactly strangers, but still. Besides, there's the risk of them catching on to my weird Barrier magic.

“No thanks. I'll figure something out.”

There's gotta be someone, right?

“I know! How about me?” Suddenly, a gorgeous blonde-haired woman appears.

“No way, not my own mom.”

Eavesdropping by the door is none other than Natalia Zenfis, the count's wife and my adoptive mother.

"Why not?" She scuttles towards me and pets my hair.

Lately, I've been thinking about telling my mom and dad about my weird Barrier magic. But I just haven't found the right moment. Putting that aside for now...

"Bringing my own mom to school is like begging to be bullied."

I'd be made fun of for sure. *"You're here with your mommy?!" "Still suckling on mommy's boobies?" "Pfft, mama's boy!"* I can already see my fate.

"I agree—that's a bit..." my dad says.

Having even her husband disagree, Mom slumps with disappointment. I feel sorry for her, so I pet her hair.

Anyway, one thing's been established: I have to go to school. But...

Heh heh heh. It doesn't mean I've given in. Just wait and see!

I return to my room.

Picking up a small figurine of a hot girl on my desk, I press my finger to its forehead. Lo and behold, the figurine transforms into a life-size boy who looks just like me.

"Leave it to me," my doppelganger says, smiling wide. "This is exactly the reason you created me, your copy android."

Somehow, I managed to create this "copy android" with Barrier magic. Our personalities are supposed to be identical too, so this is a surprisingly obedient reply.

“Not! Did you actually think I’d say that? Forget it. There’s no way I’m going to school!”

Scratch that. He’s not obedient at all.

“Calm down and listen,” I say to him. “Since you’re me, you’ll know where I’m going with this. Just think about it. There’s a way to solve it all!”

I can almost hear his brain working. *Bloop bloop bloop... Ding!*

“I got it. I’m a copy who can’t use magic, so they’ll realize what a hopeless case I am and expel me. Is that the plan?”

Well done, me. Quick on the uptake.

That’s right. My copy will go to school...but not for long.

Soon, they’ll figure out that he’s got zero potential and send him packing.

I elaborate, “It’s the most exclusive school in the country. They aren’t going to let an underachieving yo-yo stick around.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“But there’s one thing we need to be careful of. We need to get expelled due to ‘poor performance.’”

“Right... If our goal is simply to get expelled, we could easily do so by stirring up trouble or being disruptive.”

“But if we do that, it’ll probably cause headaches for Dad.”

On the other hand, if I get expelled for underperforming or lacking in magical talent, it’ll reflect poorly on the king. After all, he’s the one who referred me even though everyone knows my mana level is a 2.

In other words, we can paint the king as a putz for misjudging my abilities and

referring me in the first place.

Serves you right, old scum.

“Why don’t *you* go, then?” my copy demands.

“Because I can use Barrier magic.”

If some bully picks on me, I might slip up and use my magic in self-defense.

“What happens if some bully attacks *me* with magic?” he whines.

“You get hurt, obviously.”

“Then *you* do it! Why should I have to get hurt?”

“At least it’s better than getting killed!”

“How do you know I won’t?!”

Sure... There’s a chance it could happen.

“Don’t worry. You’re—”

“—replaceable,” we both say in harmony.

My copy screeches in horror. “I knew it! How many died before me?! Tell me!”

“I’m kidding. It’s a joke, I swear. I couldn’t go killing off a bunch of guys who look just like me.”

I have considered it, though.

“Oh, but you’ve considered it.”

“Erm... I guess it’s not always an advantage that you know what I’m thinking.”
I scratch my cheek. “Okay, okay, so I have. But Char was quick to nix the idea. She said it was ‘too mean.’”

“That I believe,” he grumbles.

I’m such a pain in the ass to deal with.

“Anyway, I’ll protect your body with a barrier so you don’t get injured. Your mission is to act stupid and get kicked out as soon as possible. Just focus on that.”

“Fine. I guess I have to if I want to keep my life as a shut-in. While you’re nestling at your lake house, I get to hole up here. We both have the same goal.”

I’ve been living luxuriously in a log cabin I built next to a lake. While I isolate myself there, my copy keeps to himself in my room at the castle. Makes you question the whole point of the copy’s existence.

Anyway.

“I’m counting on you.”

“You got it!”

Thus begins Operation Get Expelled ASAP!



We established the goal. The general plan is in place.

There’s just one thing I’ve been forgetting.

Apparently, I need to bring an attendant with me to school. It won’t look good for the son of a nobleman to show up without at least one attendant, even if I’m only there for a short time.

So, in search of a good candidate for the job, I fly off into the sky.

The commute only takes a few minutes, but it's still a bit of an inconvenience.

Before long, I arrive at a log cabin on the shore of a peaceful lake.

A single-floor, one-bedroom house with a living room, kitchen, and dining room. The biggest room is the six-hundred-square-foot living area that opens into a dining room of about four hundred square feet. The bedroom is just a place to sleep, so it's not that big.

This is my palace—the home I built for my comfortable shut-in life.

I could've easily conjured it with my Barrier magic, but I chose to put some care into the process, and had it built from scratch. Constructed from the finest lumber I could mill in the region...and all that jazz.

This is where I spend my time chilling out, experimenting with Barrier magic, lazing around, watching anime, *etc.*

Speaking of anime, an episode is currently playing on a big-screen tabular barrier on the wall.

Roughly five years ago, through a lot of trial and error, I managed to somehow connect to the internet in modern-day Japan. All for my little sister, and of course, for myself, too.

The show playing right now is geared towards young girls.

"I'll send you to the heavens ♪ Marvelous ☆ Pretty ☆ Love and Peace ★ Death ★ Explosion!"

Standing in the living room, a magical girl in a frilly pink costume waves a magic wand-like thingy and strikes a pose.

That's my little sister, Charlotte.

She seems a bit immature compared to other kids her age, but her long shiny hair and fine features are perfectly adorable. By the way, her costume and prop are handmade by me. It was a piece of cake with my Barrier magic.

The characters in anime only speak Japanese, of course, but Char studied like crazy to understand the language.

“Whew... This week’s *Tiny ☆ Love Cure* was a true masterpiece, Brother Haruto.”

Char is totally blissed out, but she turns to me and asks anxiously, “That woman commander seemed torn about her actions. Do you think she’ll repent and join the Love Cure girls’ side?”

“I think so.”

The bad guy joining the good side is such a standard trope. The chances are extremely high. It’s also classic for a calm and pretty female commander like this one to turn into a cheesy, frumpy airhead the moment she joins the good team. So classic, it’s an art.

“Ooh, I can’t wait to watch the next episode. Next week is so far away.”

“It can also be fun to binge-watch a completed series.”

“There are a few titles I’m interested in. But I’m resisting the temptation because if I stay up too late, it’ll take a toll on me the next day.”

Lessons and classes take up most of Char’s week. Not just magic theory and practice, but at her age, she’s also expected to learn history, etiquette, and all that nobility stuff. After all, she’s a young lady of the aristocracy.



“You really do work hard,” I sympathize.

“Oh, but not enough. I’m still just a fledgling. I’m a caterpillar that isn’t even a chrysalis yet. I can’t wait to become stronger and be of assistance to you, Brother Haruto—I mean, to the Schwartz Krieger. I’m doing my best to get there!”

When did she give me *that* name? Sounds cool, though. It’s German for “black knight,” right?

“Isn’t that name kinda long?”

“How about Shiva, then? I learned about it on ‘the internet.’ He is an all-powerful god from somewhere, and he symbolizes destruction and creation. Perfect for you, Brother Haruto!”

Sure, whatever you want.

Who would’ve expected a young noble lady in an alternate world to turn into such a geek?

Ever since Char discovered anime, she’s become completely infected by the delusional fantasy-life bug. She still goes on about that “evil organization” stuff, too.

Despite all that, this girl can smoothly operate gadgets that would be considered out-of-place artifacts by anyone else in this world. She’s not to be taken lightly.

Anyway, for someone with such a busy schedule and who lives so far away, Char visits my hermitage very frequently.

She can’t fly yet. Running, even at top speed, has its limits.

A round trip is pretty time-consuming, but luckily for her—

“Sir Haruto, I didn’t see you come in. I just finished cleaning your bedroom.” A gorgeous maid with red eyes and red hair emerges from the next room.

—she’s able to hitch a ride from this maid, who can run at a speed impossible for humans.

The maid with the dog ears and a fluffy tail is Flay, the Flame Fenrir. Her true form is a giant wolf, but she’s currently transformed into a human.

She wags her tail, carrying the cyclone-vacuum-cleaner-esque gizmo I made with Barrier magic.

“What about your duties back at the castle?” I ask her.

“My duty is to maintain a comfortable living environment for my master. The chores at the castle are nothing more than side tasks.”

I’d prefer if she could properly do both. To the public eye, my dad is her boss.

“Why’d you bring Char along?”

“Huh? I brought her along since I was coming anyway... Was that a problem? Charlotte, did you lie to me?”

“No. Brother Haruto said, ‘Feel free to come over any time.’”

True. I did say that. So, there’s no problem...I guess?

“But what about your lessons?”

“Today’s my day off.”

Come to think of it, I was playing outside with Char just this morning. She had me play out a special attack she’d invented called the Bloody Iceberg. But still...

“Today’s fine, but isn’t it tiring to come over on the days you have lessons?”

“It is—I have to manage my schedule down to the second to make time. But

when I come here and watch anime, I feel so recharged. I can't miss out on that!"

I mean, I could set up an entertainment station in her room back at the castle.

"If only the commute wasn't so long..." I ponder.

"My sincerest apologies, Sir Haruto. I understand not, but I gather that my lack of capability has inconvenienced you somehow."

She has a habit of apologizing without understanding why, which can get kind of annoying.

"No, I'm not talking about transportation speed. I was thinking about something more like...teleporting," I muse.

"Do you mean teleportation magic, Brother Haruto?"

"But teleportation magic is a tremendous feat," Flay remarks. "It requires multiple skilled practitioners, and preparation for high-quality ley lines. And even then, it's an extreme challenge. You cannot simply—"

"Well, I have it pretty much figured out."

"What?!"

They both stare, wide-eyed, at me.

"You know my surveillance magic, right?"

Basically, Barrier magic is all about creating unique "spaces" and "linking" them. At least, that's what I think it is.

My surveillance magic works by conjuring two tabular barriers and connecting them so that the light from one end gets projected onto the other. Or I'm guessing that's how it works.

“So, if I go like this—”

I conjure two tabular barriers, link them, and send one over to where Flay is standing. Then, I conjure a ball and toss it into the tabular barrier in front of me.

The ball travels through mystery space-time and flies out of the other barrier.

“Wh-Wh-Whoa!” Flay scrambles to catch it.

“See? I’ve already tested and proved that it works even when the portals are far apart.”

I can only create barriers if they’re in my field of view, although there are some exceptions. Ephemeral barriers and other simple ones can be made while looking through a surveillance barrier.

One time, Mom and Char were attacked by imperial soldiers, far away from my reach. I just barely managed to get there in time, but had I arrived one moment later, who knows how it could’ve ended.

I don’t want anything like that to happen again, so I’ve been experimenting with ways to launch an attack through a barrier.

“That’s incredible, Brother Haruto!”

“You never cease to amaze me, Sir Haruto. With this craft, you could transport yourself to locations far away.”

I hate to disappoint them, but I haven’t tested it with a living organism yet. Let alone a human.

Why not, you ask? The answer is simple.

I create a barrier that looks like a full-length mirror. Through it, I can see a boy who looks just like me.

I send an identical mirror barrier to my room at the castle and link it to the

first one.

“Whoa!” The other me yelps in surprise. “Oh, it’s just ‘me.’ What do you want?”

“Hey, can you come over here real quick through that barrier?”

The look on his face says *No. Freaking. Way.*

“What, do you think I’m stupid? I’m not your guinea pig.”

Rats. He’s onto me.

“Just do it. It’s for Char.”

“Bah. You think you know how to press my buttons, don’t you? But I refuse. Why don’t *you* come over *here* instead?”

“Oh, come on. Do you have to split hairs about every little thing? Just come over.”

“No dice. I know exactly what you’re thinking. You’re afraid that if it doesn’t work, you’ll be trapped in mystery space-time, right? Worst case, you could get stuck between dimensions forever, and you’ll be left alone to die of starvation. You claim it’s for our little sister, but you’re not willing to put your own life on the line. Well, I’m onto you!”

It really pisses me off when I get in an argument with myself.

But what kind of big brother would I be if I backed down now?

“Hah! Scared? You call this scared?” I thrust my arm straight into the full-length mirror barrier.

Vroop! It comes out the other side.

Even if I lose an arm, I can always regenerate it with Barrier magic. Probably.

But this is still a big risk. I can feel my heart pounding.

“Truce, okay? Shake on it?”

“Yeah, right. You’re gonna try to pull me through, aren’t you? I know everything you’re thinking. You’re me!”

His personality’s based on mine, so he totally can read my mind.

“Just get over here! Hey, don’t you run away!”

I reach all over, trying to grab him, but he’s frantic. He scrambles around the room, dodging my grasps.

Just then—

“You cheeky coward of a doppelganger!”

Flay springs past me and into the barrier. She teleports out the other end and wrestles my copy to the floor.

“You’re a sorry standin for Sir Haruto if you can’t even do this!” she berates him. “Off you go!”

When it comes to handling my copy, she really doesn’t hold back.

Flay chucks my poor copy android into the mirror.

“Hyeek!”

He stumbles onto the floor on this side.

Flay leaps back through the mirror like it’s no big deal. She’s got balls. Balls of steel.

“Are you okay, Copy Haruto?”

“Sniffle... Char, you’re the only one who has any compassion for a copy like me...” he whimpers.

I hate to admit it, but I'm pathetic.

"Sir Haruto, your teleportation magic experiment proves to be a success."

"But I'll need to place an entrance/exit barrier at the destination. It still has that disadvantage."

"Not at all. I've heard that the landing location is often unstable in teleportation magic. Your method allows for a fixed destination, which is ideal. Your ability to conduct it on such a small scale is also astonishing."

Is it, now.

I should try it out for myself, I decide. I make a round trip, which turns out to be quite easy. Nothing to be afraid of.

"All that's left is to give it a cool look."

And I know just the right look for a teleportation portal.

"I shall name it the 'Anywhere Door'!"

I modify it to look like a free-standing door, slightly larger than the average size. I mount one door in the wall of my room back home and another here in my log cabin.

Now we can travel instantly between my secret hermitage and the castle.

"Phew. Mission accomplished."

Wait a minute... What was my purpose for coming here in the first place?

Oh, that's right. I came here to pick out an attendant to accompany me at the capital school.

Now that I'm back on track, I immediately start looking around...



This spring, I'll be going to school in the royal capital. And I have to bring an attendant with me.

How will the girls react when I break the news?

"Ooh! Me, me! I'll be your attendant, Brother Haruto."

"Step down, Char. It is my duty to serve Sir Haruto. I refuse to cede that role!"

Oof, I predict an intense battle will break out. Flay usually surrenders when Char gets weepy.

For now, it's probably best to keep it a secret from both of them.

"Brother Haruto, is something troubling you?"

"No, nothing. I'm just going out for a little walk."

I slip out the door and escape.

The log cabin is on the shore of a quiet lake, surrounded by a thick forest. I squint my eyes at the glimmers of light reflecting on the water.

Just then—

"Salute to our master!"

Clacka-clacka-clacka! The dry rattling of bones reverberates in the air. An army of skeletons are straightening their posture to greet me.

These boney guys clad in armor, the Knight Skeletons, were originally summoned by a gang that was after Char's life. For some reason, the skeletons started obeying my commands, and have resided here ever since. They seem to have no intention of returning from whence they came. So I'm having them

help around with physical labor and guarding the log cabin.

It looks like they were in the middle of farming. *That's not for you to eat, is it? I mean, you're just bones.*

This lake shore isn't just a habitation for the boney army. It's also home to a lot of stray demons that Flay brought over. Before I knew it, it had become a sort of monsters' paradise. Not that I mind.

One of the knights steps out of the rows of saluting skeletons, and kneels before me.

"Oh, gracious master! How may we serve you today?"

This guy is Johnny. He's the commander of this skeleton army. I picked his name randomly.

"Oh, no, I don't need anything. Don't mind me—please carry on with your work."

Johnny rises and calls out, "Return to work! Our master is here to observe."

The boney army cheers, and with renewed vigor, go back to tilling the fields.

Being bones, these guys don't breathe or have any vocal cords. Originally, they didn't have voices. But I could tell from the way they clacked their teeth that they were trying to communicate. With Flay as our interpreter, I was able to install barriers in their mouths, which can convert the skeletons' thoughts into audible words.

"It's been so long since your last visit, Master. I would love to give you a tour of Pandemonium: The Garden of Gathering Demons!"

"Pande-what now?"

"Lady Charlotte calls this land thusly."

Another weird name bestowed by Char, I see. But this place is essentially her playground, so I don't care.

Johnny sticks by my side and dives into a running commentary.

He explains how the demons here have their own territory, and there's plenty of food to go around. It really is becoming a paradise for monsters. I'm always holed up in the log cabin, so what goes on outside doesn't matter much to me.

Johnny is a chatty guy.

He's got a genteel demeanor. Committed, considerate, and extremely loyal to me. Impeccable manners. The cherry on top is his smooth, resonant voice that's easy on the ears. He really is an ideal employee.

The skeleton guys, in general, are surprisingly adept and can pull off any task without trouble. They're great at teamwork.

Maybe one of them could be my attendant at school?

Sure, they're a little boney, but I think I could dress them in a fleshy barrier and make them look like your average human.

They'd make the perfect attendant. The only problem is...

"And so, moving forward, we intend to address the cultivation of the area on the west side, and—Master? You seem to be troubled by something. Is any part of our operation dissatisfying to you?"

You talk too much, geez! But I could never tell him that.

He's such an earnest guy.

I'm sure he'll be quiet if I order him to, but then the guilt will start to weigh on me.

I can only handle his company in small doses, like right now. But to listen to

his non-stop chatter every day from morning to night? Not my cup of tea. I feel bad for even saying that. Unfortunately, all of the skeleton guys are more or less like Johnny.

“Not at all,” I answer him. “I’m just impressed with your excellent work. I really appreciate it.”

“On behalf of us all, I receive your gracious words with deep gratitude. We will continue to toil tirelessly to please you, Master.”

A samurai. This man is a frickin’ samurai.

“Welp, I’ll be off. I have some thoughts I want to be alone with.”

I hastily say goodbye to Johnny, and sit down on the bank of the lake.

Boom. Boom. The ground shakes.

I turn to see a gigantic boulder monster approaching.

It stops by my side and gently extends one long arm, holding a tiny flower in its hand.

“What’s this?”

“I thought it was pretty...”

It speaks! I’d forgotten that I created a voice barrier for this guy, too.

He’s Gigan, the Gigantic Golem. Again, just a randomly picked name.

“For me?”

Gigan nods. I think I detect a smile in his jagged stone face.

“Thank you.”

When I accept the flower, Gigan sits on the ground, hugging his knees.

“I’m glad you like it,” he replies politely.

Oddly enough, his speech and mannerisms are like a little girl's—even though I gave him a deep, booming voice to match his stature.

The two of us gaze out at the lake. The sunlight sparkles on the water.

“So pretty...”

There it is again. That little-girly thing.

The Gigantic Golem is surprisingly quiet for his enormous presence. He's a creature of few words, and never causes me the slightest disturbance.

Despite his size, he isn't intrusive at all. In fact, I enjoy his company.

Maybe Gigan would be a suitable attendant?

The only problem is...

I peek to my side. His size is undeniably gigantic. He'd be cramped even in the castle's largest hall. The average home would be out of the question. For starters, he can't fit through a door.

My Barrier magic is close to omnipotent. I'm still learning about it, but there are some things I simply cannot do.

Making Gigan's body smaller is one of them. I lament my powerlessness.

Perhaps Flay is my best bet after all? But if I take her with me, there's a one-in-a-million chance—more like one-in-ten—that she'll turn the capital into a sea of flames.

Isn't there someone, somewhere, who would make a suitable attendant?



The winters are harsh in the empire, which lies to the north of the kingdom. Even in the southernmost part of the land, the mountains are so frigid that demons wouldn't even venture there, let alone humans.

And so, she'd let her guard down.

Who could've imagined that demon-hunters would set foot in a place like this, at this time of year?

She cries out in pain and chagrin, but her voice is quickly swept away by the blizzard.

"We've got it cornered, finally!"

"Look at the size of that thing. We'll make a fortune out of all the pelt and whatnot we can strip from it."

"Even if we all split it, we'll each have enough to live in luxury for at least three years."

There are fifty or so hunters, each with a mana level of over 20, some close to 30.

Their prey is an enormous dragon. A Blizzard Dragon—one of the strongest of its species—with beautiful, blue-white, glimmering scales. She measures over a hundred and sixty feet from head to toe. Under ordinary circumstances, she'd be the one doing the decimating.

Under ordinary circumstances, that is.

But the ambush caught her by surprise. And once she was wounded, she found herself struggling to escape the onslaught.

She's lived over three hundred years, but for a dragon, that's still very young. And because she's spent her entire life hidden away in the mountains, her

combat experience is critically low.

Her whole body is battered and bloody.

Struggling is futile, she knows, but she finds herself desperately clinging to life. The thought of letting these humans murder her and profit from her remains is too much to bear.

Just then, a moment of opportunity flickers.

The demon-hunters, assured of victory, let themselves be distracted.

The dragon is too callow to recognize the moment as an “opportunity,” but, by pure luck, she seizes it and makes an escape with her final ounce of energy.

“It’s heading south!”

“What are you doing? It’s going to escape!”

“You worthless morons. Hurry up and surround it!”

The dragon spreads her tattered wings and attempts to take flight. But she doesn’t have any mana left.

She skids across the mountain slope, kicking up the snow with her wings.

But once again, luck is on her side.

The disturbed snow triggers an avalanche, pummeling the hunters.

Am I...saved?

But her hope is crushed when she hears the angry shouts close behind. Many of the hunters survived.

Still, using the very last dregs of her strength, she manages to flee from them.

But her quiet refuge doesn’t last long...



“A giant dragon?”

Fantasy stuff, again. As one would expect in an alternate world.

My dad called me to his office, and told me the following story:

A giant blue dragon has appeared along the border of the empire and the kingdom.

The beast was seen fluttering from the empire towards the kingdom, and crash-landed before getting across the border. It then dragged itself back towards the empire’s territory.

“If it returned to the empire, it’s not our problem, is it?”

“Perhaps not. But it may appear at the border again, and possibly invade our region. I suspect it’s been wounded by demon-hunters when it was in the empire. If this dragon flies into our territory and runs amok, it could put our citizens’ lives in danger.”

A demon senselessly attacking humans isn’t an unlikely scenario.

“Gold. Have you summoned Sir Haruto just to ask him to battle a demon? How dare you!” The angry voice beside me belongs to Flay.

But her anger seems off-base.

“Calm down, Flay. We still haven’t heard what he has to say.”

Reassured by my support, my dad loosens just a bit.

“It’s true that I don’t want the dragon to be causing mayhem, but I’m not suggesting that we defeat it. My aim is to avoid damage to my region.” He rises

to his feet. “However, the chances of the dragon reappearing at the border are very low. If it’s already returned to the imperial territory...”

“Its pursuers may have slayed it.” I finish his sentence.

“Wh?! Grrr...” Flay clenches her teeth.

I could’ve worded that more delicately. Now I feel bad.

“Would you investigate the situation?” asks my dad.

“But what if it’s still alive?”

“Like I said, my priority is that it doesn’t do us harm. Do what you think is best.”

I see. He’s relying on Flay to negotiate with the dragon and find it a safer home.

But from what my dad describes, the dragon is a whopping hundred and sixty feet long; a massive beast. I try to imagine it chilling by my lake. *Yeah, that’s gonna look like a giant art piece.*

“Will you come with me to check it out?” I look to Flay.

“I refuse!”

Huh? How come?

“May I ask why?”

“Hmph. A dragon of that size couldn’t have been born in the last few years. It must be centuries old, at least. But I don’t know any blue dragon. Which can only mean one thing. While we demons were fighting against humans in a blood-soaked war for our survival, this one hid away in the mountains, turning its back to the ongoing conflict.” Flay’s lips curl into a contemptuous snarl.

“I have no interest in coming to the aid of such a coward! They deserve death at the hands of those hunters. Of course, any hunter who dares to harm one of my kind also deserves to be slaughtered!”

You're losing me. What exactly is it that you want to do?

“So, will you come with me or not?”

“Hwrr... What should I do?” she whimpers.

She's asking *me*?

I turn to my dad. “Can we have a moment to think about it?”

“Certainly. Even if you don't act, the chances are high that the dragon will be done away with. I won't force you.”

I already know where this is going, though. Personally, I don't really care. But there's someone just outside this room who definitely does.

“Got it. Let's go.” Pulling Flay along with me, I open the door.

“Ah...”

I give the little girl standing in the entryway a gentle push and close the door behind us.

“It's not good manners to eavesdrop, Char.”

“Um, um... I know. I'm sorry, Brother Haruto.”

My little sister wilts slightly, but then she quickly looks up at Flay.

“Flay, won't you please help the dragon?”

“Er, ergh...”

“It's probably all alone, hurt and scared. Please!”

I give them both a little pat on the shoulder.

“I think we’re settled on that matter, Flay. If that’s what Char wants, it’s what I want, too.”

“If you say so, Sir Haruto...”

Flay closes her eyes for a moment, and then opens them with a look of determination.

“Then let’s go slay those demon-hunters!”

Are you sure you understand our duty?

Moving on.

Flay and I set out and head north towards the border. It’s going to be cold up there.



I feel so tired...

Her senses are growing numb. She can no longer feel any pain, but her body is getting feverish. Her thoughts, too, are becoming hazy.

The young dragon had flown aimlessly, clinging for dear life, but awaiting her down the path was a band of armed soldiers.

Frantically, she turned around to crawl back in the other direction, only to be met again by the demon-hunters.

Her mana was almost completely drained, leaving her unable to hide or fly.

Dragging her heavy body, she fled, only to be attacked, then fled, and was attacked again. This went on for hours. The hours became days.

Her sense of time is long lost from spending years secluded in the mountains.

How long has this gone on?

She realizes she's lying on the ground, covered in snow.

Am I going to die now...?

No. I don't want to die. That's the whole reason I've chosen to live in quiet isolation, defying the Demon King and avoiding the war.

Any humans who wandered into her den, she'd killed mercilessly, without so much as a chance for them to beg or explain. She didn't allow anyone to know of her hideaway.

And still...

The dragon spent day after day poring over the books she'd stolen from humans, losing herself in a world of imagination.

She enjoyed her solitude. Her hideaway life was peaceful and comforting, but after three centuries, she'd come to know about certain things.

She began to fantasize about what it would be like to have a companion.

And from those fantasies, she learned a new emotion: loneliness.

The distant voices of the demon-hunters are closing in.

But it matters no more. Death will find her before they do.

I guess...this is the end...

Her wounds are so severe, it's a wonder she's still alive. The fact that she's even conscious is a miracle.

I've given in to death.

She no longer fears the demon-hunters. Her only wish is that someone—not a

human—would witness her passing.

Her fever is cooling down.

Death is just around the corner...

.....*Huh?*

Strange. I'm still not dead.

The fever is gone. But it's not because her body is getting cold.

What is this?

She can move. She can feel the ground beneath her and the cool wind against her face.

Yet there's no pain.

She can hear the cries of the demon-hunters.

Hold on, "cries"?

Yes, cries. She's sure of it now. She hears several voices hollering in agony, things like "Help!" and "Please spare me!"

At the same time, she can also hear a terrorizing voice—"Burn to death!" "Die, dammit just die!"—as well as a consoling voice: "Calm down." "Stay, staaay!"

Are they turning on each other? That would be an odd twist when they're just about to close in on their prey. It just doesn't make sense.

Huh? Huh??

None of it makes any sense. And what doesn't make sense...makes her curious.

Cautiously, the dragon raises her long neck to investigate her surroundings.

"Wow, look at that. It's quite a sight up close."

A mysterious man dressed all in black is floating in the air.



As rumored, the giant dragon is truly enormous. So it wasn't that hard to find.

It was on the verge of death, covered in wounds from head to toe. As I was healing it, my surveillance barrier detected a band of demon-hunters closing in.

Just before they arrived, I transformed into the Black Knight—or Shiva, as recently dubbed by my sister.

Speaking of adventurers from the empire, my dad's life was recently targeted by a group of them, so I only have negative associations with their kind. But these guys were unrelated.

That's why I was planning to go with my usual method: knock them unconscious in an ambush and dump them in some faraway woods.

But all of that went out the window when Flay bulldozed straight at them with nothing but murder in her eyes.

It took me everything I had to hold her back. In the moment of chaos, I grumbled to myself, *Why am I using my protective barriers to shield some scummy rogues?*

All while trying to heal the wounds of a giant dragon. I'm already tired.

I didn't even get a chance to introduce myself with the fancy new name that Char gave me. Or do my signature superhero pose, or say my cool catchphrase. Oh well.

Anyway, I chased away all the demon-hunters and healed the dragon. Finally,

it was able to lift its head. I am now standing face-to-face with the mighty dragon.

I don't know if it can understand me, but I greet it anyway.

"Hey. I'm a superhero called the Black Knight, also known as Shi—"

Fwoof!

The beast gushes its freezing ice-breath at me. Bullseye. Dead center.

"Why, you impudent rogue! How dare you insult my master!" exclaims Flay.

Insult me? Pretty sure this dragon just tried to *kill* me.

But I act calm. "I'm sure she's just agitated from being attacked by those demon-hunters. It's no big deal."

I've really matured...

"But that's your last chance! I went through a lot of trouble saving you! Try me again and you can have your wounds back. Got it?!"

...or not. It absolutely was a big deal. But I'm pretty sure I'm right to be angry, in this case.

'You...saved me?'

What's this? A cute little voice is speaking directly into my mind, like Flay did when she was in wolf form.

"For now," I reply. "Seems like you can talk. I have a question. Who are you?"

The blue-white dragon looks down at Flay, ignoring me. *A bit rude, no?*

'You... You're a demon. But this thing...is a human...right?'

"You have some nerve referring to my master as 'this thing.' The answer to your question is yes. But if you dare attack him again, there will be no mercy!"

Darn right there won't be. This dragon should already know firsthand that her attack doesn't work on me. Though she did take me by surprise, I'll admit.

I strike a fighting pose and swish a couple of jabs to show off.

'A human... But you just called him your master. Why would a demon serve a human?'

Hello? Still won't even address me? I'm about to sulk.

"My master bears no relation to the likes of those scoundrels."

'May I ask the reason?'

"If you must know, I will explain. Brace yourself for the tale of my master's infinite greatness and how fate has united us!"

Flay dives into rambling mode, like an otaku who goes on and on about his 2D waifu.

One hour later, under the freezing wintery sky...

The blue dragon has been listening intently the whole time.

"And there you have it. Incredible, you see?" Flay concludes.

'Yes, I understand now. What a shock to hear that the Demon King has been reincarnated.'

Right—Flay still believes that story. I haven't set her straight, so there's no reason she'd stop believing it.

Finally, the dragon looks at me.

'Thank you for saving me. And I'm sorry for how I treated you. I'd resigned myself to death, but you gave me new life. So as a token of my appreciation and remorse, I, too, hereby dedicate my life to you.'

Demon logic baffles me. Offering up a lifetime of servitude as casually as you'd offer someone a piece of candy? Is that just how it works with these guys?

Before I even begin to respond, Flay is already negotiating. "Very well. I hereby recognize you as a comrade, and grant you permission to live in the country of Pandemonium."

Pandemonium is a country now? And you're the one who gets to decide who lives there?

'I can live there?'

"Of course. It's a paradise for all demons."

'I appreciate it. Since, well, my old home is gone...'

"Although, hmmm. Can you do something about your size? You take up too much space."

That seems like a tall order.

'You want me to become small? Very well.'

You can?

Pwahh! Her giant scaly body emits a bluish-white light. The light glows so brightly, I'm getting blinded. Wait, I'm getting déjà vu, too.

And the giant body shrinks into—just as I suspected—a human form.

"Will this do?"

She looks like a little girl about Char's size, with short blue hair. Out of the sides of her head sprout two magnificent horns. And on her butt, there's a lizard-like tail.

“And, as I suspected, you’re stark naked, too.”

Can’t you girls transform with some clothes?

She looks cold in this snowscape, so I make an outfit out of Barrier magic like I did for Flay.

This time, I don’t choose a skin-tight rider suit. Learned my lesson there. Instead, I give her a maid’s uniform like Flay’s, who just happens to be in view as I’m conjuring it.

“What?! Where did these clothes come from? Is this...creation magic?! What? How??”

She looks absolutely flustered.

“And that is my master’s peculiar mystery magic,” Flay clarifies boldly.

“And *that* is not an explanation at all!” the little dragon girl retorts.

This is the loudest I’ve heard her speak so far.

“You need not fret about it.”

“But I want an explanation...”

As you can see, Flay isn’t the curious type. She just accepts whatever happens as part of my deal. But, apparently, not this girl. I guess not all demons are the same.

“Never mind that. How about we introduce ourselves?” I suggest.

“Leaving things unexplained makes me anxious...but if you say so, I shall abide.”

I pretend not to notice how disgruntled she looks.

“So, what’s your name?”

“I am a Blizzard Dragon. I don’t have a personal name. I ask you to please give me one.”

This seems to be some ritual that establishes a master-servant relationship for demons, as I recall.

“Then you’re...Liza.”

Seems like a safe bet.

“Liza... It has a nice ring. I like it.”

I’m glad she’s pleased.

“What was your life like up until now, Liza?”

Flay already gave her a rundown of my life story, so I ask for hers.

“Since I was born, I lived deep in the snowy mountains for about three hundred years.”

So she’s something of a shut-in, too, on a much more grandiose scale. I regard her with admiration.

“What’s there to enjoy about being a hermit in the mountains?” Flay demands.

She’s not speaking to my shut-in senpai with much respect. I’ll have to reprimand her later.

“Occasionally, I’d take on human form and sneak into the villages to steal some books.”

Out of nowhere, she starts confessing to a life of crime.

“I’d read stories, and let my imagination take me away. When I wanted more, I’d go out looking for more books...”

And that was pretty much her lifestyle. Setting aside the thievery, I admire her passion for learning.

Oh, I almost forgot. I should introduce myself, too.

I remove my helmet and show her my face.

“My name is Haruto Zenfis. When I’m in this form, I go by the name of Shiva. But my true identity is a secret, so be careful not to tell anyone.”

While I’m at it, I explain to her everything else about me. Everything that Flay already knows, at least. I emphasize which parts are meant to be kept secret.

Liza looks a bit daydreamy, but from what she’s told me about herself, she seems to have a thirst for knowledge. I figure she’s pretty smart.

Even Flay manages to keep my secrets.

“I understand. Such measures must be necessary for the Demon King incarnate to live among humans.”

Factually untrue, but the logic isn’t wrong, I guess.

I also explain Flay’s current status.

The three of us decide to head homeward.

“Oh, Liza. You can fly!” I exclaim.

Gliding through the air gracefully, she follows close behind me. She’s a dragon, after all.

I hear a howl from below. “I won’t lose to youuu!”

Flay can’t fly, so she sprints through the mountain trails.



“And that’s the whole story. She’s a demon, but can you please let her work here, too?”

As soon as we arrived at the castle, I went straight to my dad’s study.

We initially planned for Liza to live at my lake house, but she requested to be my servant, too, like Flay.

For appearance’s sake, it’s probably best to have my dad officially employ her as a maid.

“My word... Yet another demon capable of transforming into a human. And yet again, one who wishes to serve Haruto.”

My dad seems to be getting a bit tired of this.

“My, my! Goodness gracious! What an adorable little girl. I’m all in. What do you say, darling?” My mom is stoked.

“I’m all in, too!” Char hops up and down, also stoked.

Liza turns to me. “Sir Haruto, I sense tremendous magical potential from the child over there. Who is she?”



“That’s my little sister, Charlotte. You should be sure to thank her later. She’s the one who convinced Flay and me to save you.”

Liza’s eyes widen, and she walks straight over to Char.

“Thank you. My life was saved because of you. As of this day, I declare to ser—”

“Okay, that’s enough!” I cut in. “Isn’t this great, Char? She appreciates what you did.”

Pretty heavy topic for a little girl, getting hit with a sudden pledge of eternal servitude out of nowhere.

“It wasn’t me. It’s all thanks to Brother Haruto and Flay.”

Liza can see from Char’s smile that her sentiment comes straight from the heart. The dragon girl’s face relaxes just a tad.

“Is there anything I can do for you in return? I could tutor you in magic, if you’d like.”

“Are you well-versed in magic?” I ask.

“I have the knowledge. I learned through books.”

That’s right. She’s an avid reader. I don’t know what sort of books, though.

“She’ll be good company for Char,” I suggest to my dad.

“That’s fine by me. She’ll have to follow the rules of the castle. And to the public, we’ll say she’s a half-demon.” He agrees so readily, it’s like his mind was already made up.

“Gold, was this your aim from the beginning? To recruit the demon and strengthen your army?” leers Flay.

“I will not deny it. I did consider the chance of that happening. But not for my own sake.”

My dad looks at me.

Ah, I see what he's getting at.

The kingdom is currently in a state of disorder.

The king's power has been declining, and Queen Gizelotte, who was scheming to usurp the throne, has been laying low ever since I put a shackle on her neck.

Meanwhile, other nobles have been gaining power, and are starting to eye the throne like crouching tigers.

With all that going on, my dad has been grooming Charlotte to be the next queen in hopes of re-establishing order in the kingdom. After all, she has royal blood.

And in order to make that happen, he's counting on me to support Char. Having demons under my command would be, by extension, an asset to her.

Gotchu! I communicate to my dad with a glance, and he nods in response. Eye contact can say a lot.

And so, the gang just got bigger.

But Liza did spend the last few centuries as a hermit. There's a possibility she's lazy, like me. I decide to spy on her for a little while.

“You catch on quickly, Lady Charlotte.”

“Look, Brother Haruto! Look how big I can make my fireball!”

Char does a little dance in the courtyard. A fireball the size of my torso is

floating over her head. I swear, just a few days ago, the best she could muster was softball-sized.

“All thanks to Liza,” my sister grins.

“I cannot take credit. It’s all your hard work, Lady Charlotte.”

“No, it’s because you’re such a good teacher, Liza!”

It’s true. Liza is great at giving guidance. Even my mom says that Liza should be a coach.

But that’s not all.

Liza is quick to pick up new skills. From cooking to cleaning to laundry, she’s gone from totally inexperienced to the highest level of mastery, just like that.

Flay absolutely refuses to yield her role as my maid, so Liza has earned the rank of Char’s personal maid. Her meticulous work efforts are a pleasure to watch.

Suddenly, a long-forgotten thought pops into my mind.

Liza could be my attendant.

She’s the epitome of competence. She’s got top-notch skills in basically everything. She’s dedicated. And relatively quiet. Plus, she’s my role model as a shut-in.

The more I think about it, the more I see how Liza would be the perfect choice. I hadn’t realized till now what an incredible find I’d scored.

“Liza, what will you teach me next?”

But is it really right to tear her away from Char?

Oh, but I have the Anywhere Door, so it should be fine. I’m not that high-

maintenance. Liza can focus on attending to Char at the castle, and give me a hand if something comes up in the city.

After all, it's only for a short time.

Now that I've successfully cleared this hurdle, I can focus on Operation Get Expelled ASAP.

Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dragon Maid (1)

Liza, the Blizzard Dragon in human form, is insanely capable.

Let us observe a day in her life. With respect to her privacy, of course.

Liza wakes up before dawn to get dressed for the day.

She takes extreme care in her appearance, making sure not a single strand of hair is out of place. Perhaps it's because Flay warned her on the first day, "To appear before your master without proper grooming would be an egregious insult!" Never mind that Flay herself doesn't even notice when her own maid uniform is torn. I don't know what she does to get her clothes that tattered.

Then, Liza heads to Char's room.

But Char isn't there. Why, you ask? Because she's in my room, sleeping next to me. Nothing inappropriate, of course. She hasn't grown out of her habit of sneaking into my room in the middle of the night. Oddly enough, she never comes over when my copy's here to take my place.

Liza reviews Char's schedule for the day, picks out her clothes, and makes sure she has everything she needs.

Meticulous. Char doesn't have to lift a finger. I hope this doesn't turn her into a total deadbeat.

In any case, after all that, Liza heads over to my room, where Char is.

But she stops short at the door. After about twenty minutes...

Tok, tok. She knocks softly.

I'm usually asleep at this hour, but she knocks every time. I taught her that it's good manners once, and she's honored it since.

The door opens without a sound.

"Oh, Sir Haruto. Did I wake you?"

"Nah, I was awake. I'm sorry for not answering your knock."

Liza approaches the bed quietly as she whispers, "It's no trouble."

"You were standing outside for a while. Why didn't you just come in?"

"I learned that humans go through different phases of sleep. It's best for them to wake up during a period of shallow sleep."

Considerate down to the tiniest detail.

"Lady Charlotte, it's morning. Wake up."

Even the way she shakes Char is gentle, making sure not to startle her. I wish I could live an anime-trope life where a childhood friend comes over to wake me up like that.

When my little sister's finally awake, Liza instructs, "Both arms up."

Char throws her arms up in the air. Liza pulls off Char's nightgown and slips a dress over her head.

"Now, wash your face...and brush your teeth..."

After assisting with every one of these activities, the dragon maid sits the little mistress down in a chair and scuttles behind her. The sight of her brushing Char's hair is almost heavenly.

During breakfast, Liza even wipes Char's mouth. I'm pretty sure I'm witnessing the origin story of a lazy deadbeat.

Afterwards, she teaches Char practical magic skills, tutors her in magic theory, and so forth. The studying part is boring to watch, so I'll spare you. In any case, as Char mentioned earlier, Liza's an excellent teacher.

Even when my little sister takes a break, Liza doesn't stop working. She goes to clean Char's room, helps the other maids, *etc.*

The best part is when she does laundry. She gathers all the sheets from every room in the castle, and washes them in a massive whirlpool of water she creates in the sky.

"I saw it in a thing called 'anime' that Lady Charlotte was watching. Swirling the fabrics round and round helps the filth come off," she explains.

Indeed: a gigantic washing machine. After erasing the whirlpool magic, she spins the sheets to remove the excess water.

She does this all on the side while teaching Char's lessons. Yet the laundry comes out clean every time. Incredible.

As I was saying, she never takes a moment's rest.

"Aren't you working too hard?" I ask.

"It seems that I enjoy keeping busy. My body is so much lighter now than it was in dragon form, so it feels easy," she explains candidly, offering the slightest smile.

The rest hardly needs telling.

Passing as a half-demon to the public, Liza has already captured the hearts of the castle's male workers. Before you know it, she's snagged the number one

spot on the list of female staff the guys want to marry.

She's pretty much the perfect maid. But Liza does have one weakness...

One afternoon, Char invites Liza to drop over to my hermitage between lessons.

"We're going through...this?" Liza fearfully eyes the door embedded in the wall.

"Yes. It's a makeshift teleportation portal that Brother Haruto made."

"I know. I've seen Sir Haruto and Flay go through it. But there is nothing 'makeshift' about teleportation magic. This does not leverage ley lines or anything, and the idea of throwing a person into a magic device is..."

"Don't worry. There are no dangers to anything Brother Haruto creates."

My little sister tugs at Liza's arm.

"But how does it work? We should at least ask Sir Haruto to explain the mechanism before—"

"According to Brother Haruto, it's created by 'linking mystery space-time' or something."

"Mystery what?! Does that mean Sir Haruto doesn't understand it either?!" Liza crouches on the floor as she holds her head, whimpering, "No, no..."

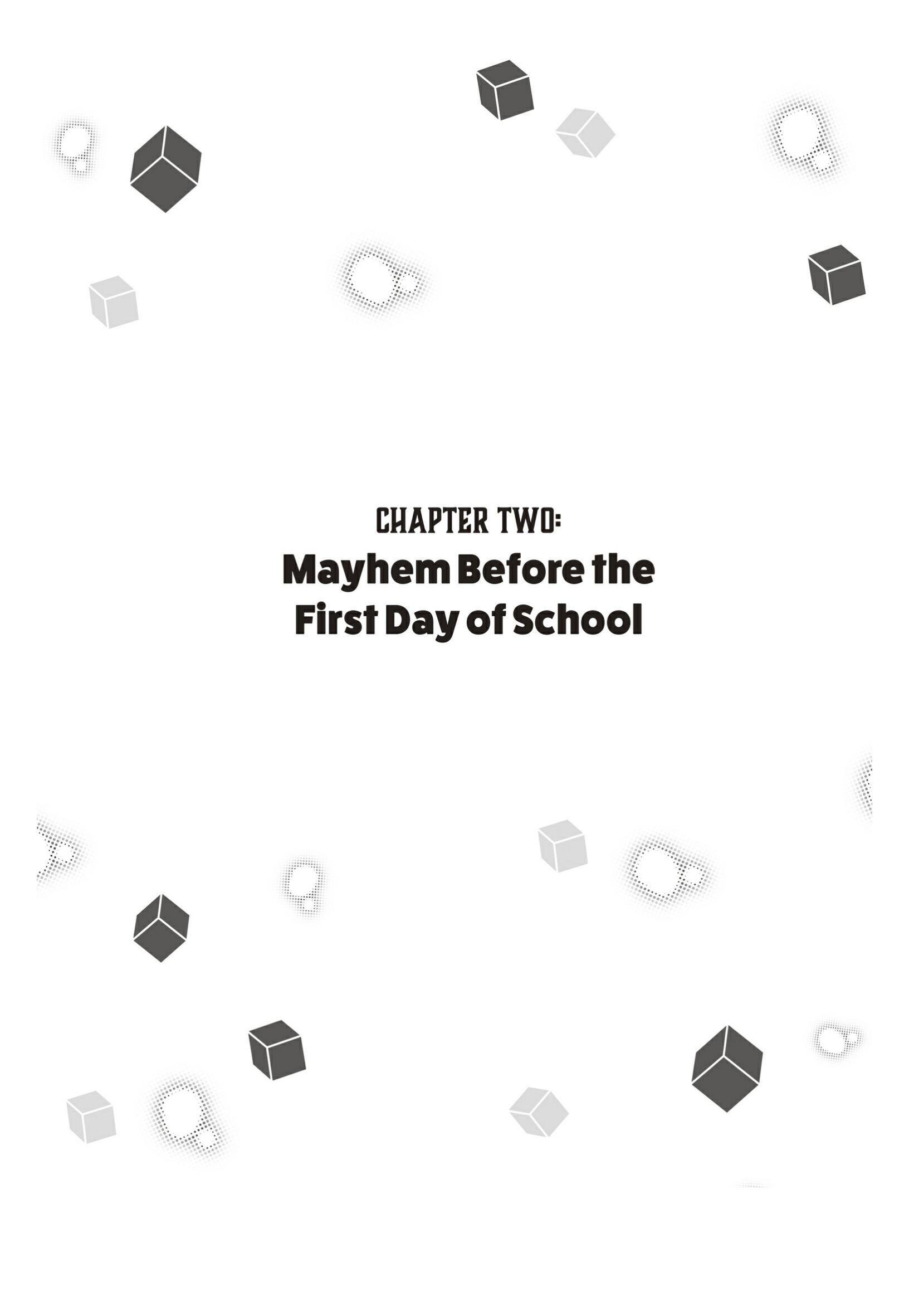
"I'm sorry, Brother Haruto. I didn't think Liza would get this scared..."

Summoned by my remorseful sister, Flay and I attempt to persuade Liza.

Since I don't really understand the mechanism myself, the best I can do is lead by example. After we all demonstrate the walk-through several times, Liza

finally resolves to try it.

In the end, she does manage to pass through the door...with her eyes shut tight the entire time.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also circles with halftone patterns, some of which contain smaller shapes inside them. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER TWO:

Mayhem Before the First Day of School

My departure to the royal capital is in less than a week.

In the meanwhile, my little sister and I each had a birthday.

Most of my packing is done, but there's one thing I completely forgot about.

So here I am, sitting in my hermitage, waiting for the right moment.

"I'll send you to the heavens ♪"

As usual, my little sister Char is absorbed in anime. She strikes a pose along with the character onscreen.

The cute, frilly, pink costume she's wearing completes her look.

Ever since I built the Anywhere Door—my makeshift teleportation portal—Char's lost all reservation about coming over.

She'll spend the smallest window of her breaks between lessons here. Not that I mind.

"Whew! This week's *Tiny ☆ Love Cure* was another true masterpiece!"

Every episode is a masterpiece to her, huh? I'm glad she's enjoying herself.

"But next week is the series finale... I don't know what I'll do with myself after that."

"Don't worry. I'm sure a new show will start soon."

"I look forward to that, too...but I want to bask in the afterglow of *Tiny Cure* for just a little longer."

The bittersweet sentiments of geekdom. I feel you.

“Oh, my break is almost over. Liza, we’d better hurry back.”

When Char calls across the room, a reserved little maid waiting in the corner glances this way. This petite young beauty with short blue hair is Liza—originally a giant dragon.

Flay and I found her wounded, so we healed and rescued her. But the narrative has gotten warped among the locals with the passage of time.

The current rumor is that I (or rather, the guy in the all-black costume) defeated the giant dragon.

The story of us (or Flay, rather) chasing the demon-hunters away was passed down by them like a telephone game, and got more and more distorted as it made its way into our region.

“Please help me change clothes,” Char instructs her maid.

“Okay.”

Liza’s words are curt, but her care to Char is thorough.

“Hold up,” I say. “Why are you changing here?”

Too late. She’s already stripped down to her undies. Her body’s flat and smooth overall, as an eleven-year-old kid’s should be.

“This costume is a bit revealing. Mother and Father will be flabbergasted if they see me in it. So I’m changing here before I return to my room.”

Char understands what basic modesty is. But for some reason, she doesn’t apply it towards me.

“Liza, we have a magic lesson next, right?”

“We’ll be reviewing the basics of Water element magic. But you’ve pretty much got it down, Lady Charlotte, so we’ll start on the applied magic theory

section.”

“Yet I’m still behind the curve. Water isn’t my element, so I’ve been procrastinating on my studies on the topic.”

“That’s your previous teacher’s fault,” Liza says supportively. “Even if it isn’t your own element, there are great benefits to understanding attributes of your enemies or collaborators. Those who only take an interest in their own elements are bound to get tripped up. Like Flay.”

Come to think of it, Flay and Liza had a sparring session recently. Liza won that time.

I remember her saying, “I’m fairly weak for a dragon. When it comes to mana alone, Flay is much more powerful. But no matter how many times we spar, I always end up winning.”

She wins with technique, not with power.

Which is super awesome. I admire her. As a level 2, that’s the kind of strength I strive for.

“Thanks. You do so much for us,” I tell her as she busily helps Char into her clothes.

“Oh, dear! Am I making you do too much?” Char hastily starts putting her shirt on by herself.

But Liza snatches the shirt sleeve and motions for Char to extend her arms.

“It’s no trouble. This is the work I’ve been given. In truth, I enjoy it.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. But if anything bothers you, please tell me, okay? I want to be your friend, Liza.”

Char takes all sorts of private lessons as a young lady of aristocracy, so she

rarely has time to explore outside the castle. Naturally, she doesn't have friends her age.

Liza has the appearance of an elementary-school-aged child, like Char. But she's actually around three hundred years old.

I notice that Liza's staring at me expectantly.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I await your command. What shall I do?"

"Huh? You mean whether or not to be friends with Char?"

Liza nods her head.

"That's really up to y... Oh, right. Um... You decide. That's an order."

Liza's reserved expression softens into a bashful smile. She's always so impassive, but I think subtle moments like these are a glimpse of her true self.

"Yes, Sir Haruto. You are, indeed, a wonderful master."

Liza turns to Char, who looks back at her nervously.

"Yes. Let's be...friends."

"Thank you so much, Liza ♪"

Char gives her a big hug. Liza gently places her hands on Char's back. Aww, adorable.

"But please be strict with me during my lessons. I want to be able to support Brother Haruto as soon as possible. So please, have no mercy!"

"Yes. Matching up to Sir Haruto's power may be impossible, but you have the potential to come close, Lady Charlotte. I believe in you."

"Thank you♪"

A friendship between young girls. As a geek, I'm partial to two-dimensional girls. But this I could eat up like a starving man eats rice. Come to think of it, I miss eating rice. And Japanese food.

My little sister is almost ready to go. It's time to break the news to her.

"Um, Char. Listen..."

I announce that I'll be moving to the capital for school, starting next week.

Char's eyes widen and she freezes like a statue.

"Oh, but I—"

Before I can explain that my copy is going in my place, and that I'll be hiding from my dad out here at the lake house...

"School... Underground student councils... Terrorists... Magic battles..." she mumbles.

Pardon?

Char interrupts her own stream of ominous mumbling and distorts her sweet little face into a glower.

"Liza, cancel all of today's plans."

"Very well."

"We will be conducting an emergency Round Table conference!"

"Understood."

Wait, what? Hold on, I don't understand what she just said. I mean, I know what those words mean, but—what?

"Summon the knights, Liza. I will go tell Mother and Father that I'll be away until nighttime on important business!"

Liza politely bows at me and runs outside. Char returns to the castle via the Anywhere Door.

Good grief. I didn't even get to tell her about bringing Liza as an attendant.

But maybe it's better to hold off on that until the last minute. I don't want her to put up a fuss. While I do feel bad about tearing Char away from her only friend, Liza's going to be at the castle most of the time, anyway. I'm sure it'll be okay.

"Well... Guess I'll watch some anime."

Time to check out that alternate world fantasy series I'd added to my favorites.



Not too far from my lakeside log cabin, there's a pavilion.

In it, Charlotte is standing in front of the "knights" around a large, circular table.

"I wish to express my gratitude to you for taking the time out of your busy schedules, and gathering here on this auspicious occasion," she announces. "I apologize, sincerely, to those of you whose work has been interrupted."

Charlotte bows her head deeply.

The dog-eared maid raises her hand. "This is a Round Table conference. None may object. I myself abandoned my cleaning chores to attend. But if your parents take issue, I'll claim that I was playing with you, Lady Charlotte."

"Hmm, they may not buy it. Father spoils me rotten, so he'll let anything slide,

but Mother is quite strict. Also, I've already told them that I needed to help you with something, Flay."

"You used me as your excuse?!"

"The Round Table is a secret council. I could hardly tell them the truth."

"I understand that, but still!"

Liza, the blue-haired dragon girl, watches this exchange with her usual daydreamy stare.

Sitting next to her is a graceful-looking skeleton. "Always a pleasure to see you two frolic. However, Lady Charlotte, shall we adhere to article seven of the Round Table code of conduct: refrain from personal conversations? Let us move on and address the matter on the agenda," Johnny, commander of the Knight Skeleton brigade, clacks.

"You're right. My apologies for getting sidetracked. Is everyone ready?" Charlotte's gaze sweeps from member to member, all around the table, and then outside the pavilion.

A giant man-like creature made of stone sits with his knees huddled. Gigan, the soft-spoken Giant Golem, is also a member of the Round Table knights. His usual spot is outside, since he doesn't fit at the table.

Ehem! Charlotte clears her throat.

"Brother Haruto will depart for the royal capital next week. He's planning to attend magic school there."

"What?! This is the first time I'm hearing about it!"

"I only caught wind of it moments ago. Perhaps there's a reason he made his announcement so last-minute. For instance, he was worried that I wouldn't

handle the news maturely, and might indulge myself in ploys to stop him.”

“I hate to admit it, but that goes for me, too,” Flay says, covering her eyes with one hand.

“To think our master is that considerate of our mental well-being...” says Johnny.

“Master, too kind,” Gigan adds.

“Now, let us address the issue at hand,” directs Charlotte. “Brother Haruto is a sorcerer of tremendous power. What could a school possibly teach him at this point? Nothing!”

Flay nods. “I agree completely. I cannot reveal the details, but Sir Haruto doesn’t need any teaching from mere humans.”

“What do you mean by that? Ugh, I hate it when you talk like you know something I don’t know. Liza and Johnny, do you know, too? Is it some kind of demon secret? Please tell me! Pretty pleeeeeease?”

“Hey! Stop trying to pounce on my tail. There are some affairs we simply cannot impart to humans, not even to a member of the Round Table.”

“But it’s a secret about Brother Haruto... I want to know...”

“Hnnrf... No. Your puppy eyes aren’t working on me! No, I say!”

Noticing that Flay is about to cave in, Johnny clacks his teeth to draw attention.

“Lady Charlotte, you are the apple of our master’s eye. You are in a class far above the rest of us. But the matter is quite delicate. I beg you to let it slide for the time being.”

“Th-The apple of his eye? Oh, stop it... Tee-hee ♪”

“I’m glad you understand. Now, let us resume our council.”

“Yes, of course. Pardon me.”

Ehem! Charlotte clears her throat and, once again, brings the meeting to order.

“Father says that the king himself nominated Brother Haruto to attend this school. Therefore, refusal is not an option. But if Brother Haruto has agreed to attend, he must have his reasons, must he not?”

Johnny nods in agreement. “Something about this particular affair drives our master to handle it alone.”

“Exactly!” Charlotte points right at Johnny. “According to Brother Haruto, school is a horrid, dangerous place.”

“What?!”

“Even for someone as great as our master...?”

Flay and Johnny choke in disbelief. Liza, the record-keeper, diligently transcribes the conversation.

“Of course, there’s nothing in this world that can be a threat to Brother Haruto. Then what could cause him to say such a thing, you ask? Well, I’ve been learning about school by watching anime.”

“What is this ‘anime’?” asks Johnny.

“They’re illustrated stories from another world that can move fluidly and talk expressively. According to these stories, there are secret societies in schools called ‘underground student councils.’ They conspire to lure promising youths onto a path of evil. They wage magic battles against anyone who interferes, and recruit powerful helpers from the outside. They are bad people.”

Char looks around at her enthralled audience, and gravely declares, “And the underground student council is controlled by a giant evil organization with power so mighty it can take over an entire country!”

The crowd gasps and stirs in panic.

Flay raises a hand.

“Such an affair would be worthy of Sir Haruto’s attention. That may be why he’s leaving. No, that *must* be why!”

“But what can we do?” Johnny asks. “Even if we wish to support our master, getting around in the capital won’t be easy for us demons. Especially Gigan and I, since we stand out in a human crowd.”

Charlotte has the answer. “We must operate in the shadows, so as not to get in Brother Haruto’s way. What we need is information. I’ll take the lead by infiltrating the capital, and I will find out the evil organization’s secrets.”

“But the capital is quite far from here. Gold and Natalia will panic if you go missing for days, Lady Charlotte.”

“Brother Haruto will likely install an Anywhere Door. His home base is here. Flay, Liza, and I will find opportunities to travel via the door and gather intel. Johnny and Gigan, please continue developing Pandemonium.”

“Very well,” Johnny affirms. “To be honest, our hands are already full with precisely that. Miss Flay is constantly bringing in stray demons she stumbles on—er, I mean, rescues—and we’re busy building accommodations for them.”

“It’s become crowded, hasn’t it? I’ll ask Brother Haruto to expand the borders.”

Everything is falling into place.

The members agree to iron out the details later, and the conference comes to an end.

Just then... “May I ask a question?” Liza, who’s been taking notes the entire time, raises her hand. “Shouldn’t we consult Sir Haruto about this?”

For a moment, everyone falls silent.

Char pipes up first. “We don’t want to trouble Brother Haruto with any more worries than he already has.”

And the others follow.

“It would be a burden on Sir Haruto to have to oversee and direct all of our activities.”

“With all due respect, sometimes it’s the servant’s duty to anticipate the master’s intentions.”

“Zzz...” (Gigan is asleep.)

True, it’s best not to cause any trouble for Sir Haruto. But still...

“Okay, I guess...?”

...Liza can’t shake the murkiness in her chest.



“And that’s what everyone talked about today.”

It’s late at night when Liza finally concludes her long report. *So, that’s what Char meant about a round table...*

I stand up, still in my pajamas, and clamp both hands down on Liza’s

shoulders.

“You really are a great servant!”

“Er, huh?”

Now, I’m not implying that the dog-eared maid isn’t. She’s obeying my instructions of “No need to report every little thing” very faithfully. I’m just saying that it’s extremely helpful to have staff who can be flexible about making decisions, like Liza.

“Normally, I don’t mind what shenanigans they indulge in, so long as it doesn’t get out of hand. But this is a bit much.”

Char alone would be one thing. But if Flay and Liza go sneaking around in the capital and someone discovers that they’re demons, there’d be a huge public stir.

Of course, I’m always open to playing along with Char’s fun, as long as it’s within reason.

“Is it true you’re battling an evil organization, Sir Haruto? Are you worried that we’ll fall into harm’s way?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Huh?

I thought Liza was the one sensible person out of the bunch, but is she caught in Char’s fantasies, too?

An underground student council? Controlled by a giant evil organization? Yeah, right. Imagine living in a world run by wackos like that. Of course they don’t exist.

Then again, Liza tends to take things seriously.

I reply, “Oh, right... The giant evil organization. I’m still piecing together information on them. This enemy requires greater vigilance than ever.”

If I ever told her to just play along with Char’s little game, lying to everyone like that would only stress her out.

“Yes...of course.” Liza swallows apprehensively.

Since she’s here alone, I guess now’s a good time to tell her.

“Actually, I was hoping to assign you as my attendant at the school.”

“Me...?”

“Yeah. But there’s no need to stick to me like glue. I’d like it if you could pop back into the castle every now and then to make sure Char and company aren’t getting out of hand.”

“Of course, that part is fine... But will it be okay for a demon like me to work in a city full of humans?”

“Don’t worry. We just have to hide your horns and tail. I can take care of that.”

“Sir Haruto... Do you intend to use that unexplainable magic again? And as for traveling between here and the capital...are we using that...teleportation device again?”

Still hung up on that, huh? Liza seems to be afraid of using convenient tools if she doesn’t understand the mechanics of them.

“You’ll get used to it,” I promise.

Her face twitches as she tries to hide her discontent.

“I don’t intend to stay for that long. I’ll defeat the enemy in no time and return to the castle.”

Please, play along, I entreat her.

“Very well. I will do my best.” Liza relaxes ever so slightly.

I guess I’ll have to keep an eye on Char and the gang, too. Best to nip any problems in the bud.

The sooner I can get expelled from school, the better. Then I’ll just tell them, “Thanks to you guys creating a distraction, I was able to operate unsuspected. Mission complete!” Thus, a happy ending for everyone.

Playing along with a kiddo’s fantasies takes a lot of work.

I let out a sigh and call it a night. Time to sleep. Zzz...



The queen of the kingdom, Gizelotte, and her son Laius live in a separate annex from the royal castle. All entry is strictly prohibited, except for their servants.

You can guess the king and queen’s relationship from this living arrangement.

Princess Marianne, the cherished daughter of the king, hurries towards the annex.

She’ll be seventeen this year, and her beauty has grown more vividly resemblant of her late mother. She lifts her skirt as she scurries—hardly the manners of a lady—and the guards turn their heads at the sight of her long blonde hair flowing in the wind.

They don't stop her. And not because they were entranced by her beauty.

Princess Marianne is the only person who is permitted by the queen to freely enter the annex.

She runs into the building, but doesn't slow her pace. Her breath is steady, and her eyes are bright with excitement.

When she finally reaches her destination, she gives the door a half-hearted knock and bursts into the room.

She cries, "Laius, we've received an answer!"

"Hey! Don't barge in here without permission, stupid."

"Why? Were you doing something you wouldn't want people to see?"

"Sh-Sh-Shut up! It's a matter of manners, dumbass!"

"How many times must I remind you? You should tone down your language."

"Hmph. I'll call you whatever I want."

Prince Laius is at his desk with a pen in hand. He turns his chair to face Marianne.

Laius, too, has grown in the past five years.

He's tall for his age, and solidly built. Not only has he improved on his already extraordinary magic talent—as the son of the kingdom's most adept swordswoman—he's honed his swordplay skills with great zeal. All of which began since the day of *that* defeat. But his mean gaze and his brash manner of speaking are the same as they've always been.

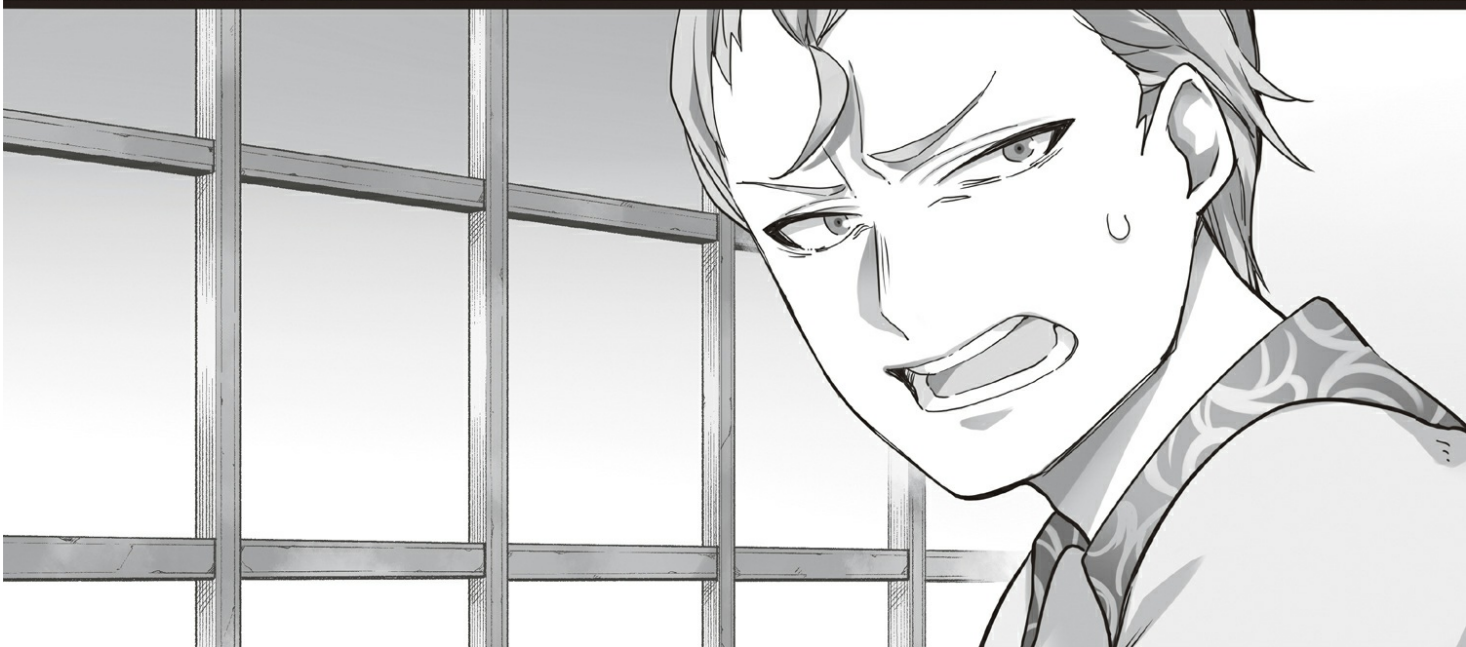
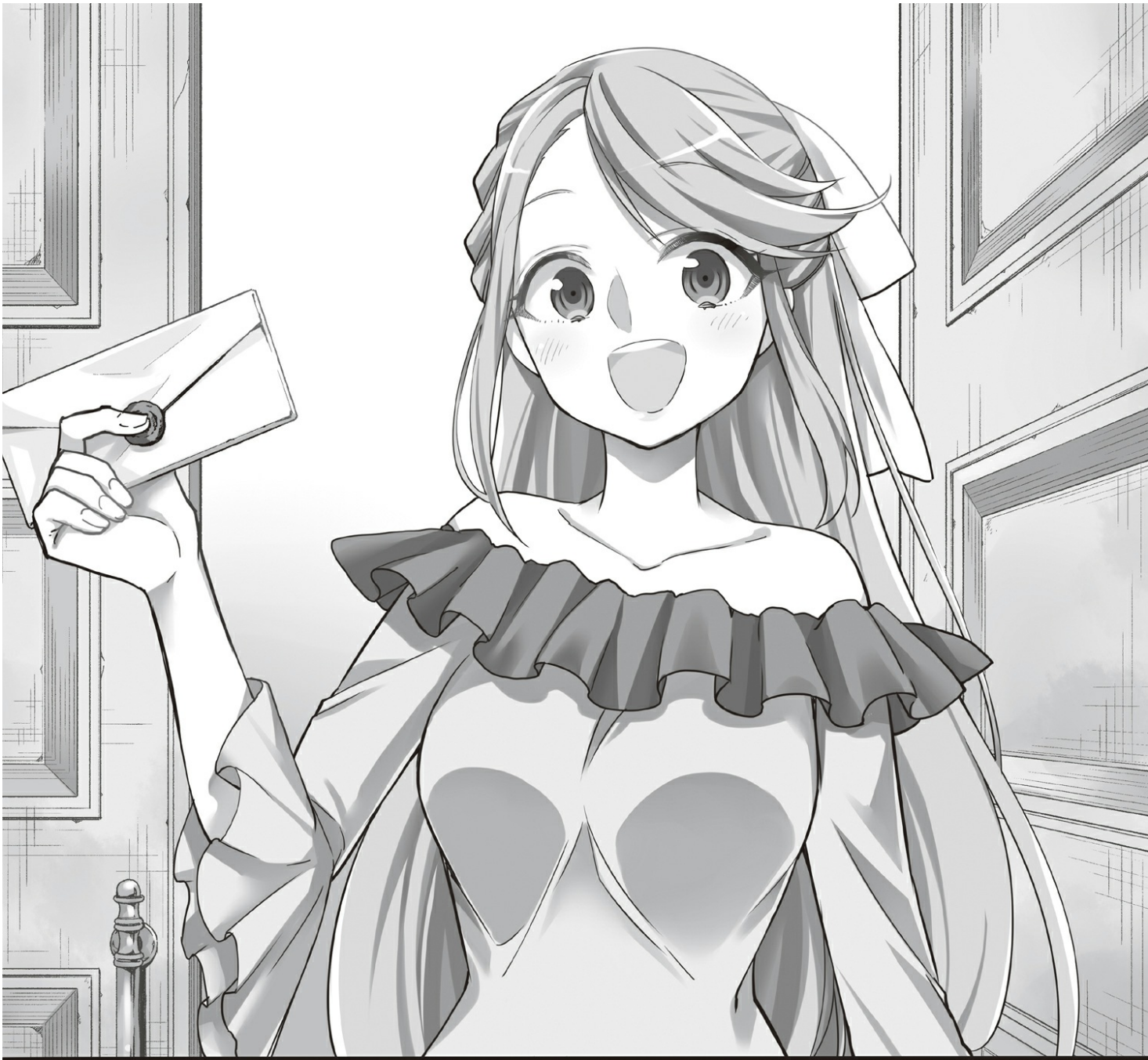
"I see you haven't grown any more pleasant. As your older sister, it saddens me," Marianne sighs.

Laius is irked by her tone.

Ugh! Ever since that trip, she's gotten maddeningly informal with me! The nerve!

He can't shake the feeling that it's all *that* kid's fault.

"Haruto's coming. So what?" Laius grunts. "There's no need to storm in just to state the obvious. It's a demand from our father, the king. The kid can't refuse."



“Aren’t you just above it all. Have you finished your lessons for the day? Are you writing yet another love letter that you’re never going to send?”

“It’s not a I-I-I-love letter!”

“Let me guess. Is it to Charlotte?”

“I said it’s not! Why would I write to that snotty little kid?”

“To Haruto, then?”

“N...no...”

He’s so obvious.

Marianne knows very well that Laius has been repeatedly writing letters and tearing them up. Clearly, they were meant for Haruto.

“Given your position, surely you could have arranged to visit the count’s fief again.”

“Mother wouldn’t permit it. When I asked her to arrange another survey tour, she screamed at me.”

“Oh, so that’s why you wanted Father to write the letter to have Haruto come to the royal capital.”

Getting Haruto to join the Royal Academy in the capital was indeed Laius’s idea.

Delighted that her little brother depended on her for the first time, Marianne appealed to her father, the king, to send the letter of recommendation to Count Zenfis.

“I want to know the secret to his strength. Since that day, I’ve been training rigorously to improve my swordplay. But the stronger I get, I can’t shake the

feeling that he's getting stronger, too."

Marianne had the same feeling.

It was just that one time, but Marianne still remembers the bewilderment she felt when she witnessed Haruto's boundless potential. But Laius experienced it firsthand, in their duel. The impression Haruto left on him must be even more vivid.

"If he attends the same school as us, there will be more chances for me to get a better look. That's all," he mutters.

"That defeat really changed you, I see. Though it hasn't made you any less arrogant."

"And you've certainly dropped any decorum you once had. Come to think of it, I heard you showed up to the king's study with quite the degree of tenacity. Didn't you park yourself in his room and declare that you wouldn't budge until he wrote the letter?"

"Wh-Who told you that?"

"The guards were gossiping about it. Looks like you're more fixated on him than I am," Laius teases.

"I-I-I don't have a crush on Haruto!"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Oh... I mean, I wasn't suggesting that you were in love with him or anything..."

Marianne's face turns bright red.

"Wait... Do you actually...?"

“N...no?”

She’s so obvious.

If Marianne and Haruto were to marry, it would be a big handicap for Laius in terms of succession to the throne.

“Well, whatever...”

That isn’t his concern.

“Did you say something?” his sister asks.

“It’s nothing. Don’t you have bigger problems right now? I hear there’s some weirdos ganging up at school.”

“So you’ve heard... Yes. In the last two years, these new students—devotees of a questionable religion—began to enroll. Their influence has been spreading among other students, too.”

“The Church of Lucifyra, or something like that?”

The religious group started small. But in recent years, they obtained massive funding from a nameless source, and their followers have been increasing dramatically.

What’s peculiar is that, despite how very little is known about this religion, members of the aristocracy—prominent business and political figures—have been converting.

The official religion of the kingdom is Mijaism. Lucifyrism is a new religious group that falsely claims to be a branch of Mijaism. But rumors within the royal castle say that it’s a form of devil worship.

“Their dogma is extreme,” the princess says. “Some nobles have even pledged to overthrow the monarchy. It’s vexing that the royal family can only stand by

and do nothing.”

The problem is complex. Or is it, in fact, simple?

After all, the source of the cult’s generous funding is...

“What could Mother be thinking?”

...Queen Gizelotte. And rumors of her ties to this group are spreading everywhere.

Laius looks to Marianne. “You’re hoping that Haruto will do something about them, aren’t you?”

“I know it’s presumptuous of me, but a part of me does hope. Of course, I wouldn’t demand it of him. His abilities may seem limitless, but for one student to take on an enormous cult is too much to handle.”

Marianne looks down at the floor. “I just want the students to be able to dedicate themselves to their magic studies without getting caught up in political and religious conflict.”

“A sentiment befitting the student council president.”

“Don’t tease. I was only nominated because of my royal status. Of course, I fully intend to carry out my responsibilities.”

“All right, all right, Little Miss Perfect. Still though, no matter how exceptional he is, there’s a limit to what one guy can do alone. And he’s certainly no match for Mother. Oh, but...”

Laius dredges up a memory. “Come to think of it, Count Zenfis made mention of some odd vigilante in his fief.”

“The one we heard about during the survey tour? The Black Knight?”

“I pick up on news from that region every now and then. Most recently, he

defeated a giant dragon or something.”

“Is that true? He must be quite a renowned man, then.”

“Do you think he has some connection to Haruto? The guy’s supposed to be some sort of superhero. Maybe he’d help us out if we ask.”

“Asking for help from someone of unknown identity may be risky...”

The prince and princess are so immersed in their conversation that they don’t notice the presence of the person who’s just slipped into the room.

“Well, well. You certainly seem to be having a lively conversation.”

“M-Mother?!”

It’s Queen Gizelotte.

Laius stumbles to his feet so quickly that he almost knocks over his chair. He straightens his posture.

“Stepmother. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you.” Marianne forces a smile, but her cheeks feel tense.

Queen Gizelotte was the princess’s beloved role model. That is, until five years ago, when the queen began wearing a prisoner’s collar around her neck.

The change in her was gradual. She seemed to be in constant fear of something. Over time, she grew more and more brazen about lashing out and menacing everyone around her.

“Yes, it has been a while, Marianne. You’re becoming more beautiful each time I see you.”

“Thank you ver—”

Just as Marianne bends to curtsy, the queen lunges at her throat.

“Where did your eyes just wander to?!” She digs her nails into Marianne’s neck. “Were you ogling this collar? Do you find it funny? Pathetic? Disgraceful? Do you dare to laugh at me like the others?”

“N...no! I w-w-wasn’t...”

“Mother! Please stop!” Laius cries out.

Gizelotte turns her icy glare towards her son.

“Heh, I jest. A mere pleasantry. Our future king should not let his composure be shaken by such trifles. And Marianne, it isn’t ladylike to stare. Best you watch yourself.” She releases her grip.

Marianne collapses, coughing violently.

Gizelotte walks over to Laius without so much as glancing at the girl gasping on the floor.

“I understand that Count Zenfis’s son will be attending the same academy as you.”

“H-How did you know...” Laius stammers.

“Why, you were just talking about it. Oh, I wasn’t eavesdropping, mind you. I merely overheard.”

Which means, at the very least, that his mother heard everything they said after that point. Including his speculation about the connection between Lucifyrism and her.

Laius’s knees are locked in fear, unable to move.

“I imagine the boy will be quite nervous, coming from the backwoods of the count’s region. Laius, I trust you’ll be a good friend to him.”

“Y-Yes...”

She draws closer to the prince until her lips touch his ear, and whispers, “You will extract all the information you can about this so-called Black Knight from that vermin.”

“Huh?”

“You will not breathe a word of this to anyone, you understand? You will do so without Marianne or the boy himself noticing. And you will share the information with Mother alone.”

Gizelotte steps back without waiting for his response and looks to Marianne, who’s still curled on the floor.

She grabs the princess by the hair and seethes, “Come, Marianne. I will escort you out. Your purpose has been served. You will not set foot here in my annex ever again.”

She yanks the girl to her feet, ripping out several strands of her hair.

Marianne gasps as she looks into the queen’s pitch-black eyes. She fears the queen will kill her if she dares to question why, let alone refuse.

“Heh...heh heh heh. Soon. Very soon. The day I’m liberated from this cursed collar is nigh!”

The queen leaves the chamber, dragging Marianne behind her as she cackles.

Sounds of unhinged laughter and the princess’s blood-curdling screams mix through the echoing hallway.

O, God! O, Lucifyra! Heed my prayers!

Laius’s legs finally give out and he drops to the floor.

I've made a horrible mistake. He can't stop shaking. He's gotten this boy—the only rival he ever hoped to surpass—enmeshed in something horrific.

"I'm sorry, Haruto. I'm so sorry..."

He clutches his knees as he chokes out words of apology over and over, knowing they will never be heard. And it torments him inside to know that there's nothing he can do.





The day of my departure for the royal capital is here.

Everyone is gathered at the gate of the castle to see us off.

“Travel safe, Haruto. Though I’m sure you’ll be fine,” my dad hails.

“Yeah, no problem. I have Liza with me.”

My copy will be carrying out most of Operation Get Expelled ASAP, anyway.

But he’s been putting up a huge fuss—complaints like, “The journey will go so much faster if you do it,” and “I’m doing all the work at school, so the least you can do is carry out the first act.”

Pushing him too hard could affect the mission later, so I decide to go along with his wishes. If he gets too bent out of shape, he could end up going on strike. He’s me, after all.

Sheesh, I’m already dreading it. There’s going to be all sorts of initial paperwork and stuff. Not looking forward to that.

“Are you sure I can’t come along? Just for a little bit? The very beginning?” my mom wheedles.

“I don’t wanna be the guy who shows up with his mother, okay?”

I’m not planning to be there for long, but I don’t want to stick out on my first day.

Next to my dejected mom is Flay, crouching down on all fours, being bitter.

“Why Liza? Why not me? Why *her*...”

This morning, when I told her that Liza would be my attendant, she went berserk. As expected. It took a while, but she eventually calmed down.

“Brother Haruto,” Char says, stepping forward. “Evil shall never prevail. Godspeed!”

“Uh, right. Thanks.”

There is no evil. No underground student council, or big bad organization, or any of that. Probably.

“Liza, please take good care of Haruto,” my dad says.

“Worry not. I will do everything possible to see to Sir Haruto’s care,” Liza promises. She still has the short blue hair, but her horns and tail are gone.

I made some minor tweaks to my optical camouflage barrier and crafted a customized wearable version for Liza. We’re claiming that she can make her own horns and tail disappear. As usual, no one bothers to question it.

I climb into the carriage, and Liza onto the coach box.

She slaps the reins, and we begin to trundle forward.

“So long!” I wave out the window, fighting back the dread with my brightest smile, until the castle is far behind us.

Several days later...

“Brother Haruto, isn’t it time for you to go to the capital?” Char asks off-handedly.

I’m hanging out at my hermitage by the lake.

Char has been here since early morning.

“Oh. Is it already?”

Time sure flies when you don’t want it to.

Instead of going to the capital, I headed straight to my hermitage.

I have zero interest in long journeys where I’m jostled around in a horse-drawn carriage. Flying would get me there in half a day.

Besides, I’ve got my Anywhere Door. I already set one up, and left it hidden just outside the capital.

I don’t want to arrive earlier than I need to, so I’ve been chilling out here until the last minute.

“If we go now, we can probably make it back by lunch. Shall we, Liza?”

“Sir Haruto, you look extremely reluctant.”

I *am* extremely reluctant. School isn’t starting yet, but there’s a ton of paperwork and whatnot to deal with.

Thudthudthudthud! Flay stomps into the room.

“Sir Haruto! You’re leaving, aren’t you? Before you go, I beseech you to reconsider—”

“Give it up. I’ll be back as soon as the paperwork is done, anyway. You wait here quietly and be good.”

Once again, Flay falls to her hands and knees in despair. I almost feel bad for her.

“We’re leaving the carriage here. Take care of the horse, okay?”

“Yessir! Worry not, Sir Haruto. I will fatten him up nice and plump!”

You know he’s not for eating, right?

I head to the Anywhere Door embedded in the wall.

“Sir Haruto, what about your luggage?” Liza asks.

“All good. It’s taken care of.”

“You’re using another magic I don’t understand, aren’t you...”

I stowed them away in mystery space-time. Can we just call it “storage magic” or something and leave it at that?

Anyway, it’s time to go.

Ka-chk! I open the door and drag my still-reluctant attendant through...

We step out into an overgrown field.

More precisely, we’re just off the main road that leads to the capital.

I figured that we might be seen if we show up too close to the capital. And if we landed inside the capital, there’d be no record of us passing through the border gates. This way seems like the safest bet.

“Sir Haruto, look.”

I look in the direction Liza’s pointing.

A horse-drawn freight wagon is careening across the field at a very high speed. The wagon is full of people, not wares.

A giant beast is charging like a bullet after the wagon.

“What’s that? A cow?”

No, a buffalo? Something humongous like that.

“An Evil Bison,” Liza answers. “Rare in these parts, I recall. Perhaps it got separated from its herd. And it looks hungry.”

Being an avid learner, she's memorized not only the geography of the capital and its surroundings, but also common demons in the area.

"So it's exactly what it looks like. The demon beast is attacking those people."

"I believe so."

It's none of my business, but I'd be a bad big brother if I just stood by and did nothing.

"Stay here, Liza."

I transform into the Black Knight—*Shiva Mode activated*.

I don't want to accidentally run into the wagon passengers in the capital and get recognized as the guy who helped them.

Ka-vwoosh! I jet towards the freight wagon.

Just then, the horse stumbles, and the wagon tips over.

Before I can deploy a protective barrier, a little kid is flung out of the cart.

One of the passengers leaps out of the wagon and catches the child mid-air. They land gracefully on the ground.

"I'll distract the beast. The rest of you, run!" shouts the gallant rescuer.

The guy is wearing a black shirt, black dress pants, and a long ponytail—his hair's as white as snow, in stark contrast to the black outfit.

Oh, he's a pretty-boy. But just as I think this to myself, I notice the large swelling of the hero's chest, practically bursting out of her shirt.

The girl in the ponytail and boys' clothes passes the child to the mother, and sprints alongside the demon beast.

"GMOO!"

Sure enough, the demon beast turns its attention towards her. Lowering its head, it charges straight at her, horn first.

VWAM!

The girl goes flying!

“Miss!” the little kid cries.

“I’m fine! Hurry and escape!” she calls out, trudging unsteadily. She definitely doesn’t look fine.

“MOO!”

The buffalo demon’s eyes gleam. It’s getting ready for a second attack. *What will become of the White-Haired Ponytail Girl?!*

I’m entranced by the suspenseful scene, but quickly realize I shouldn’t be standing around watching. This isn’t an anime or a TV show. This is real life.

The beast charges again.

“M-MOO?”

But it’s not going anywhere this time. I’m using a barrier to levitate its body so that its hooves aren’t touching the ground. The wild animal frantically kicks around.

“MOOF?!”

I jump up and torpedo-land on the beast’s head. Its eyes roll back as it blacks out.

Gee, that was easy. The big guy is probably too weak from hunger. Sorry, but I can’t help you there. I don’t carry around snacks.

Everyone is staring agape at me, the super sketchy dude in black who

appeared out of nowhere.

The White-Haired Ponytail Girl seems to regain her senses.

“Who on earth are y...”

The next words she utters aren’t what I expect at all.

“No, wait... I shouldn’t be demanding your name—the proper thing to do now is to thank you, am I correct?”

“Uh... I guess so, as far as basic manners go...”

The question was so random, I break out of character.

She’s probably still in shock from the ordeal. I’ll let it slide.

“Oh, good,” she sighs with relief. “I was about to be rude to the person who saved my life.”

She bows her head, although she’s still wobbly from the injury.

“You saved me. And for that, I thank y—wh?!” She freezes.

I’m healing her wounds—I can’t help it.

“Is this your doing...? But...this is no ordinary healing magic...”

Even in her state of confusion, somehow, she still looks dignified.

Huh? Her eyes are red. Not bloodshot. Her irises are, in fact, bright red. Paired with her platinum-white hair and pale skin, the color of her eyes is alluring.

“Are you okay, miss?” The child from earlier runs up to the White-Haired Ponytail Girl with a look of concern.

“I’m all right, thanks to him,” she says.

The child then turns to me. “Thank you, sir! You’re so cool! You defeated that enormous demon.”

I'm just glad the kid didn't call me "Uncle." Including the years from my previous life, I'm technically in my thirties.

"Pardon me." The white-haired girl looks my way. "I didn't get to finish, so please allow me to start over."

"Oh. Uh, sure. Go ahead."

Her conversational skills are terrible. Bad pacing, prone to interrupting... I'll have to be careful not to let her hijack my flow.

"Because of your deed, all of us are safe. Thank you."

"No need to thank me! After all..."

Ka-blammo! I strike my signature superhero pose.

"I am Shiva, the harbinger of justice!"

Finally, I get to do a proper introduction. I'll bet Char would be pleased.

But... Huh? The White Pony Girl and the other people by the wagon are all giving me the deadpan stare. Except for the one child, who grins, "A superhero! That's so cool!"

The kiddo's eyes sparkle with pure admiration. Reminds me of Char when she was little. I guess she's still like that.

Feeling pretty smug about myself, I proceed to fix the wagon and the horse's broken leg, as well as the injuries of a few people who fell off the wagon.

"You're quite something. Is there anything you can't do? But—that healing magic included—it doesn't seem like ordinary magic..."

She's surprisingly perceptive.

I should derail the conversation. "Why are you all riding in that wagon?"

Are they captives being trafficked or something, like in that “Donna Donna” song?

“It’s a passenger wagon.”

“That old thing?!” I break character again.

“The fare is cheap. It’s a freight wagon, hence no hood. The driver lets passengers board if there’s extra space. I rode it from a monastery in the southern region of the kingdom, but wound up detouring through a village up north.”

Sounds like a long way around. Doesn’t look like a comfortable ride, either.

White Pony looks at me apologetically.

“Really, I should be expressing my gratitude not just with words, but with a financial reward. But as you can see, we’re from poor backgrounds...”

“Fret not. The harbinger of justice doesn’t expect compensation.”

It’s called “noblesse” something or other. Her gaze of admiration is starting to make me uncomfortable.

“I’ll be going now.” I scramble for an out. “That bison seems to have gotten lost from its herd. I’ll have to find its family and reunite them.”

“What?”

What, did I say something weird?

“You truly are something else. You even have compassion for a demon...”

It hasn’t done anything to me personally. Not like my family was in danger. I have no reason to kill it.

White Pony’s red eyes darken, and she looks down.

With a wistful smile, she sighs, “I wish there were more people like you in the world.”

“Will we meet again?” she asks. I give her a short, “We’ll see,” and we part ways.

After waving goodbye to the freight-passenger wagon, I rejoin Liza.

She can communicate with the demon beast, so we ask it where it got lost. After a quick survey of the area, we locate the herd rather easily.

I toss the beast back into its herd. Mission accomplished.

But there’s just one thing...

“Liza, is something bothering you?”

“That girl with the white hair...” Liza says. “It’s hard to say. I don’t know how to put it into words...but something felt odd about her...”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe if I’d gotten a closer look.”

I hope we don’t run into her again. She seemed pretty sharp.

Anyway.

Apart from a little hiccup along the way, we made it to the capital with no real issues.



The royal capital is a walled city.

The king's castle is located atop a hill. The township around it makes up the city itself. I'm familiar with the castle because it's my birthplace, but I've never been to the city before. I was thrown out before I could check it out.

"Wh-Whoa, Sir Haruto! Look, look. There are so many shops. And so many people."

Liza's in full tourist mode.

"Oh that's right, you've only ever lived in the mountains."

"I visited the city in the empire several times to get books. But it was much quieter there. Unlike here, where it's full of life."

To put it nicely, this place is full of life. But I'd say it's chaotic.

We jump onto a cross-town passenger wagon (not a freight). After a brief ride, we reach the eastern district of the capital, and get off in front of the school.

The Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic.

Named after the sage with the highest mana level in history, this academy isn't just an elite school within the kingdom. It's the top school in the entire country.

Normally, students enroll at the age of fifteen and graduate after five years.

Throughout its history, the school has produced a ton of famous alumni. These days, it attracts not just the most talented sorcerers within the kingdom, but the best and brightest from other countries, too.

Obviously, I'm not going to fit in with a crowd like that. Especially not with the

extroverted, partying types.

I can't wait to be done with Operation Get Expelled ASAP and get the hell out of here.

The enrollment procedure starts at the main gate.

Right at the entrance, they make our IDs. Mine's a student ID, Liza's is an attendant ID. We don't need to show them when exiting the main gate, but we have to present them for re-entry. "Don't leave without it," they emphasize. There are a bunch of other instructions, but I let most of them go in one ear and out the other.

Once inside the academy, we have to find the administrative office building and fill out some paperwork for the dormitory. They want all sorts of details, like exactly what's in my baggage. Such a hassle.

Just when I think I'm done, they hand me another heap of forms to fill out. My HP is already at zero.

I introduce myself to the dorm director halfheartedly, and finally reach my room.

"Sir Haruto, are you all right? You look exhausted."

"I've never had to do in-person applications until now."

Can't we just do it all online? Oh, that's right; there's no internet in this world.

The first thing I do is dive onto the bed. It's so fluffy and comfy.

The room is pretty big. It feels spacious because the furnishing is minimal. I have a private bathroom. There's even a servant's room (double occupancy).

So this is the aristocratic dorm life, huh. I mean, I *am* the son of a count—no less, one of the most powerful nobles in all the land.

I'm ready to kick back and relax. But I might as well do that where I'm most comfortable.

I set up the Anywhere Door against one of the walls. I make the door blend into the wall so that the dorm director won't notice when they make their rounds.

Without further ado, I return to my hermitage.

"I'm home."

Ah, I forgot to leave my copy at the dorm. Oops. Oh well, I'll just drop him off before nighttime. If I get busted for being absent, I'll say I went for a walk or something.

"Welcome home, Brother Haruto. How was the royal capital?"

"I'm exhausted from the journey and all the paperwork. For realz, my memory's going fuzzy. And I'm hungry."

I look at the clock. It's way past lunchtime.

"Flay, can you make me something to eat?"

"With pleasure—"

"Why not go out to eat at a restaurant in the capital?" Char cuts in.

Flay sulks.

"Uh, I don't know..." As I hesitate, Flay's expression brightens. *Swish, swish!* Her tail waggles.

"There's no need to dine out, Sir Haruto," she chirps. "I'll be happy to prepare a meal for you. How about a delicious, slow-cooked stew?"

That sounds like it might take a while.

“Hm? What is it, Char? Why are you pressing against me on your tippy toes?”

Indeed, Char is leaning in and gesturing to Flay.

“Say what you will. I have no intention of abdicating my duty to...” Flay brings her twitchy ear closer to Char’s mouth. “Mm-hmm. Hmm... Well...”

After hearing whatever my sister whispered, Flay perks up. “Sir Haruto, perhaps dining out would be a nice change of pace. As a matter of course, I will accompany you!”

What was that all about? I don’t know what Char said, but she’s definitely got Flay under her thumb.

Before I know it, we’re set to go to the capital for lunch.

“I have the perfect disguise for Flay so she’ll blend in. No one will suspect she’s a demon.” Char pulls something out and pops it over Flay’s ears. It’s some sort of white fabric.

“Now she looks like she’s wearing a furry-ear headband! And here... We can hide her tail under a long skirt!”

Um, nobody in the world is going to buy that. She looks like she’s wearing a tent. Slightly less dignified and maybe a tad cuter than usual.

Still, a good big brother shan’t diminish his sweet little sister’s creative ideas.

“Maybe we should be a bit more thorough, okay?”

I make Flay’s ears invisible with optical camouflage.

“Amazing! You’re so awesome, Brother Haruto! She looks totally human from every angle.”

“As a demon, I have mixed feelings about this...”

“Here, Flay. Let me see your tail, too,” I instruct.

“Thank you. It’s been tickling my crotch.”

Flay bends her knees out and lifts her skirt up. She fumbles around her butt and pulls out her fluffy red tail. *Sheesh, girl. A little modesty, please.*

I erase her tail with my camo barrier, too.

“Remember, I’m just making them invisible. Your ears and tail are still there. Be careful and make sure nobody touches them, okay?”

“Yes, Sir Haruto.”

“Did you hide Liza’s horns and tail too, Brother Haruto?”

“Uh, yeah.”

I played it off to my parents like Liza did it herself.

“All right. We’re off to the capital ♪”

Char is fizzing with energy, and Flay is all smiles.

But Liza looks...

“Not the *door* again...”

...sick of it.



Entry to the campus is strictly controlled, but leaving is a breeze.

The four of us (including two demons and a child) teleport into my dorm room and stroll right out of the main gate.

The neighborhood around the school is a quiet residential area. A main street lined with shops is just a short walk away.

We pick a random restaurant for me and Liza to grab our late lunch. I'm ready to head home after eating, but Char is dead-set on exploring the capital.

I mean, I figured...

"Now then. Flay, you cover the southern district. Liza, you take the west. Brother Haruto and I will investigate the eastern district. Let's all meet up in the central plaza at sundown."

Char's holding open a big map of the capital that she brought from home. *I wonder what that's all about.*

"Roger that!"

"Very well."

The map was sprawled out on the table while we were eating, too. Char was grumbling about it being outdated and slightly inaccurate.

"Our objective is to grasp the layout of the city. Be sure not to stand out, or cause a stir, or get into trouble," my little sister cautions.

"Leave it to me!" the fiery-haired maid says confidently.

That was mostly meant for you, Flay.

The two maids sprint off like the wind. They're running so fast, the passersby turn their heads to stare. So much for not standing out.

"I thought we're here to enjoy the city," I say to my little sister.

"Yes, of course. But we must learn the city's layout in order to be prepared. *They* have the geographical advantage, you know."

Who's *they*?

This must be another one of her games. Something about a round table? As her big brother, I guess it's my job to play along.

"Shall we, Brother Haruto? It's a date ♪"

It is?! Including my previous life, this would be my first date ever. Not counting the rare occasions the two of us visited the towns in our region.

So now we're walking around the city on a so-called date.

"Look, Brother Haruto! What a beautiful piece of jewelry ♪"

Char ogles the store display with sparkles in her eyes.

I'm a die-hard indoor person, so I don't see the appeal of wandering aimlessly and gawking at shop windows. But seeing my adorable little sister happy? I enjoy that big-time.

We—literally—sprint as we explore the eastern district and arrive at the city center.

The vibe in this area is sophisticated. Very posh. The people parading around are dressed classily. The eastern district was similar. But when I think back, the northern part of town where Liza and I arrived was rowdy. I guess there are rich and poor neighborhoods.

"Look, Brother Haruto! There's a lot of hustle-and-bustle up ahead. Do you suppose it's the central plaza?"

There does seem to be a lot of foot traffic up the road.

A plaza is, normally, where people gather to hang out. The kind of people who flock towards it remind me of zombies.

The weather's nice. I'll bet there are going to be giddy couples picnicking on the grass and shirtless dudes throwing frisbees.

Ugh. Don't wanna go, don't wanna see.

But I suppose I have nothing to fear. I'm here with a girl. Sure, she's my little sister, but nobody else knows that. And she's leagues cuter than anyone in this herd.

Gaining some confidence, I follow Char.

"Over here, Brother Haruto."

Shh! Don't call me your brother!

"Watch where you're going, Char. You could get hurt."

"Eek!"

Just as I'm warning her, Char collides with someone.

"Whoa, there."

A figure zips out of the side streets and bonks into Char. Their arm gently clasps around Char's shoulders, catching her fall.

What do you think you're doing to my precious little sister? Get away from her!

But wait, is that...?

"My apologies. I was in a hurry and wasn't watching where I was going. You all right?"

It's her. The girl with the snow-white ponytail and black shirt and dress pants.

The same handsome girl who was attacked by that crazed bison this morning.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry, too. I wasn't watching where I was going either,"

Char replies.

“Glad you’re not hurt. This is a busy area. We both ought to be more careful, huh?”

“You’re right. Tee-hee-hee!”

That White Pony is getting a little too friendly with my sister. She’s not a kidnapper, is she?

Grr... I glare at her like an overprotective dog. Just then, our eyes meet.

“Oh, aren’t you...?”

Huh? White Pony leaves Char’s side and is heading towards me.

Technically, we haven’t met since I was in Shiva Mode last time. Then why would she—

“Have we met before?” she asks.

“Beats me. I’ve never seen you before.”

“I don’t remember your face, either.”

Is this a prank? Or is that her pickup line?

Maybe I’m actually a love magnet... I joke to myself.

“But...” she continues, her red-eyed gaze piercing straight into me.

“...I do remember that boundless and extraordinary mana inside of you.”

Yikes. She almost flipped a switch in me.

If I didn’t see my little sister innocently running towards us, I’d have blasted

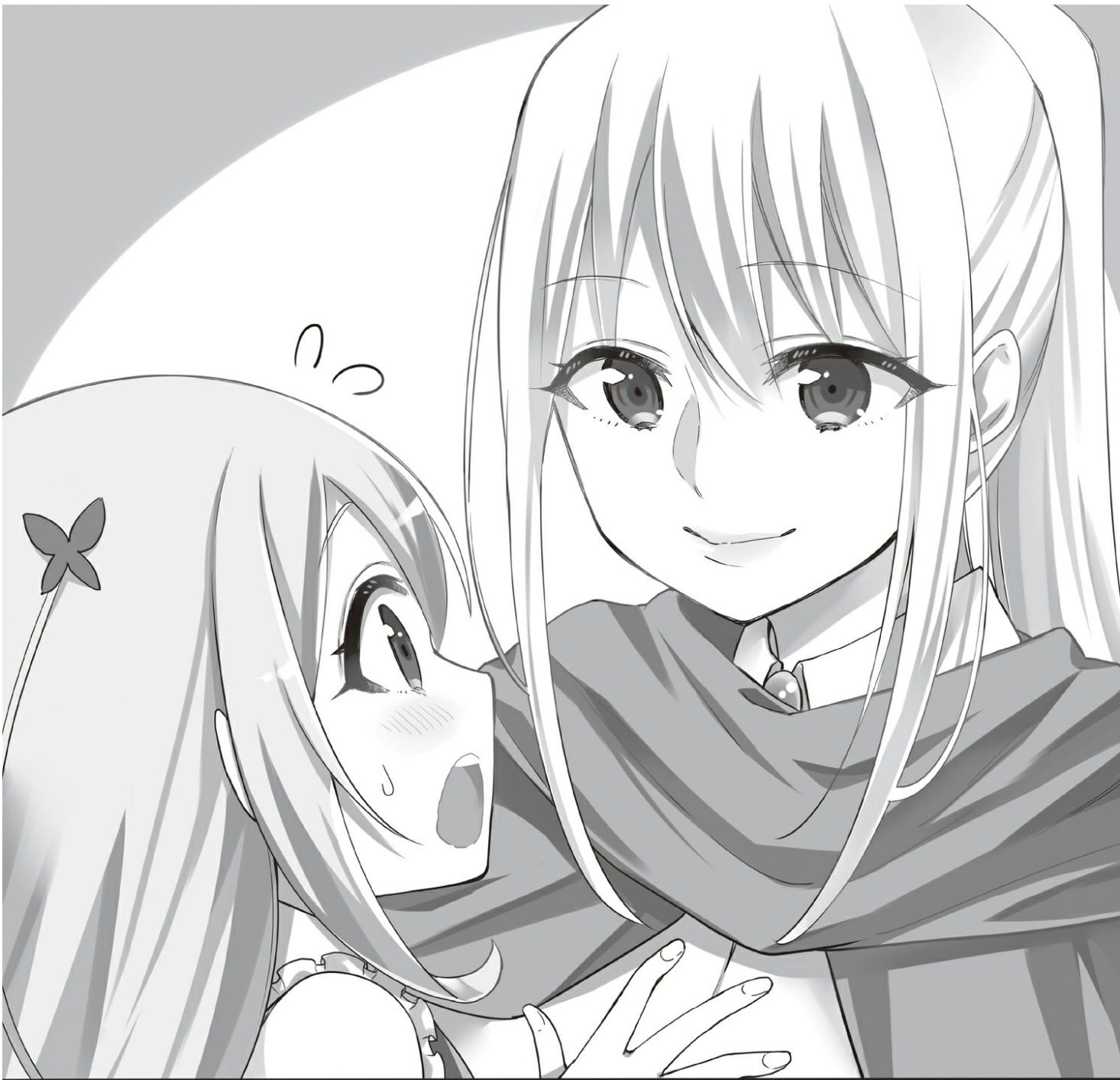
this girl into mystery space-time.

“Brother Haruto? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing,” I say to Char, and quickly turn back to the stranger. “And you. My mana level is a 2. ‘Boundless’? It just sounds like you’re taking a jab at me.”

“Huh? Oh... Is that...so?”

“Why would I demean myself with such a lie?”



“I see... I’ve been on a long journey, beset with troubles. In my exhaustion, I seem to have erred in my judgment. Please forgive me for insulting you.”

She bows deeply. What could I say to that?

Now that I think about it, just because she said she “remembers,” that doesn’t mean she’s referring to Shiva. The girl’s wrong about the “boundless mana” part to begin with. Even if she did suspect Shiva and I are the same person, there are a million ways I could dispute her claim.

At any rate, I don’t want to pursue the topic any further.

I decide to change the subject. “Weren’t you in a hurry somewhere?”

“Right! I’m late for a job interview.”

Ah, so she came to the city looking for work. She did mention being poor.

“I’d better be going now.” White Pony waves to Char and swiftly breezes away.

I hate to say it, but she looks cool no matter what she does.

“Shall we be going, too? ...Char? What’s up?”

Char’s gaze lingers on the distant silhouette of the White-Haired Ponytail Girl.

“There’s something strange about her...” she says under her breath.

Liza said the same thing.

“I can’t quite put my finger on it, but she’s no ordinary person.”

“Hmm. Welp, don’t worry about it.”

I’m not going to worry about it either.

This is the last time I’ll be wandering around the royal capital. I’m going to be inside the school grounds, so I doubt I’ll see that girl again. They don’t let

outsiders onto the campus. Besides, once I'm expelled, I won't have any business near the capital.

Anyway, now that I'm done with all the registration stuff, I can go back to relaxing in my cabin until the entrance ceremony.

Little do I know that my days of tranquility will be a short-lived dream...



Nobody told me about this. In fact, I was specifically told this *wouldn't* happen.

Whatever happened to the whole "You're exempt from taking the entrance exam because the king personally recommended you" deal? It's not like my dad to make a mistake like this.

The ceremony is in three days, and suddenly they want me to take an exam.

The school administration said it's just a formality, a placement test before classes begin.

I was planning on chilling out at my hermitage until the first day of school, so this comes as a huge disappointment.

But when I think about it, it actually might be the perfect opportunity.

Formality or not, an exam is an exam.

I could use this as a chance to demonstrate how incompetent I am, and maybe the school will kick me out before classes even start. Woohoo.

Rather than run the risk of letting my copy screw it up somehow, I decide to

handle it myself.

Because there's a good chance it'll involve you-know-what.

After getting lost in every possible way around the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic's campus—ridiculously long name—I finally locate the main building. It looks like an Italian cathedral.

I get lost in there for a bit, too. Finally, I manage to meet up with a round, sweaty, middle-aged dude in robes. I guess he's a teacher here? He introduces himself, but I'm not really listening.

Sitting all alone in a dome-shaped classroom, I take the written exam.

"You have one hour for this test. The questions are very basic—the sort of things that would come up at the dinner table, if you're the son of Count Zenfis—so this should be a walk in the park for you."

The sweaty guy tries to flatter me. I guess because I'm the son of nobility (a pretty powerful count, no less).

But nobody ever quizzed me on magic at the dinner table. What kind of family would do that, anyway?

I look down at the exam, ready to answer every question wrong and peace out, but... *What the heck is this?* I don't understand a thing. It's crazy hard. I don't even know half these words. Come to think of it, I've never actually studied magic, except for my Barrier magic.

I mean, I always had someone knowledgeable beside me. She was practically a walking Wikipedia. Anything I didn't know, she'd spoon-feed me the answers right there and then!

I'm talking about Flay. She's well-versed in magic, surprisingly. And lately, there's also Liza, who's an even bigger nerd than Flay.

So anyway, this is a problem... Wait, no it's not.

If I guess at the answers, there's a chance I might accidentally get some questions right. But there's no risk of that if I simply write "I don't know."

So I get to work, answering each question with "I don't know." My answer sheet looks bleak.

"Hm?"

About halfway through, I come to a question about Barrier magic.

It's asking me to write down all the characteristics, limitations, and conditions of Barrier magic.

Barrier magic in this world seems to be completely different from the Barrier magic I can use.

They might get suspicious if all of my answers are "I don't know," so I decide to give them something that resembles a real answer for once.

"You can move barriers.

"And add colors to them if you want.

"Maintaining barriers doesn't consume mana."

Supposedly, all of the above are the opposite of regular Barrier magic. There are some things I'm still uncertain about, so I only write down what I do know. I fill up about half the answer space. Still, I doubt they'll give me any points for this.

The last question is about Ancient Magic. The answer space for this one is bigger than the others.

I'd lied to my parents and told them that I'm studying Ancient Magic...and actually did end up learning quite a bit about it. It bears some similarities to my Barrier magic, so I've got a pretty good grasp.

The library at my castle has some novel-style literature on Ancient Magic. One book, by an author with a really long name, was particularly interesting.

So I have a lot to write about this topic.

While I'm taking the test, the guy in robes starts sweating harder, muttering to himself, "Wait... What? Swapped out...for the actual exam? Wha... Questions about Barrier and Ancient Magic, even? Ehh...?"

Sounds like he's dropping hints about something bad to come.

In any case, the test is over. When the man picks up my answer sheet, his demeanor changes. His expression goes blank.

What? What is it?

The sweaty man says, "Next, we'll measure your mana level with Mija's Crystal—"

"What?!"

"I-I'm sorry?! Have I upset you in some way?"

"Uh, no. Not at all. But I already stated on my application that my max mana level is 2. So maybe there's no need to check it."

My mana level is not the issue. It's the fact that I'm non-elemental. My dad cautioned me not to reveal that part.

"Well, it's part of the exam. Which is really just a formality anyway..."

He wipes his sweat.

No worries; this was anticipated.

I have a back-up plan. I usually hide the royal insignia on my chest with a sticker barrier I call “photoshop texture.” All I have to do is slap an “Earth” version over the element part of the crystal ball’s display. Easy.

We head to a reception room.

“Well, well! You must be Haruto, son of the Earth-Shattering Warhammer.”

I’m greeted by a runt.

“A handsome lad, you are. Major points for the black hair.”

Leaning back haughtily on the sofa is a little girl with dark-brown, messy hair, like she just rolled out of bed. A saucy, but cute, face. She’s wearing tiny glasses and oversized black robes.

“A-hah! I know just what you’re thinking. ‘What’s a child doing here?’, am I right? Ahaha! How rude of you!” she snaps at me.

I didn’t even say anything.

At the sweaty guy’s bidding, I sit down on the sofa opposite her. Set on the coffee table between us is a crystal ball.

“Never mind that. I’m a teacher at this school, actually. My name is Tearietta Luseiannel. I know it’s long, so do call me Tear.”

It sure is a long name. But I feel like I’ve heard it, or seen it somewhere before...

“Now,” she continues, “I don’t care if you’re the king’s hand-picked rookie. If

you get on my bad side I can send you packing before school even starts.”

“Seriously?!”

That means all I have to do is piss her off.

“O-Oh? Interesting. Your reaction seems more thrilled and hopeful than fearful. Are you, now?”

Can’t deny any of that.

“I don’t dislike weirdos. In fact, I’m quite fond of them. My heart is swelling with excitement.”

Professor Tear sticks out her chest. Not exactly “swelling.”

“Where did you just look?” the professor hisses. “You were thinking, ‘I don’t see any swelling,’ weren’t you?”

Man, she seems like a real pain. I wonder if she can read that thought, too.

“Moving along, let’s check your basic knowledge of magic.”

Mr. Sweaty nervously hands her my answer sheet. The easygoing expression on Professor Tiny Tear sinks into a stern one. Understandable. The sheet’s crammed with *I don’t knows*.

“Moving on to measuring your mana level.”

I place my hand on the crystal ball in front of me. I’ve got my photoshop texture ready. *Bring it on!*

Professor Tear mutters something. *Fwaa!* The crystal ball glows brilliantly, then bangs up and down on the table. A gust of wind sweeps through the room.

Ka-crash!

Um, it broke?

Professor Tear's and Mr. Sweaty's jaws drop.

Was it defective or something? I swear this is my first time breaking one.

But this might actually work in my favor.

Mija's Crystals are a super rare and valuable artifact created from unexplainable ancient technology. They can't be replicated with today's tools. And I just broke one. That's sure to be a serious offense.

Professor Tear's babyface gets all pinched up, and she starts to shake like a leaf. Right where I want her. *Go ahead. Let me have it. Tell me, "Get the hell out of here!"*

"Magnificent..."

Huh?

"Did you see that, Polkos! Mija's Crystal shattered. Ahahaha! Completely shattered! This must mean his mana is beyond what the crystal can handle. Why, his abilities might even rival the great sage Granfelt's!"

Polkos? Oh, she means Mr. Sweaty.

"But Doctor Luseiannel. His max mana level is said to be a 2. Why would Count Zenfis make a false claim? Even if the count wishes to conceal the boy's true level, why choose such a conspicuously low number?"

"Eh, I don't trust any of it. The result they're claiming may very well be true.

But how can we be certain that Mija's Crystal is one hundred percent accurate? As a researcher, the very act of putting blind faith in some antiquated relic made from obsolete technology is an egregious affront."

"Doctor, this is precisely the sort of thing that gets you labeled a heretic..."

"Shut your gob! It's not just the crystal incident. His knowledge in magic, too." She looks down at my answer sheet. "Let's see... As expected, the imperial sorcerer-level questions went over his head. I'd swapped out the exam when I heard that he was the king's cherry-picked newcomer. But even so..."

Professor Kiddy Glasses lets out a squeal of excitement.

"His knowledge of Barrier magic is outstanding! This! This right here. It's extremely close to the theory I proposed in my latest research on Ancient Magic!"

"You mean the one that was rejected by the entire academic world?"

"Silence!"

Professor Tear takes a breath and continues. "His response to the Ancient Magic question is excellent as well. It's so perfect, it's almost as if he copied it word-for-word from my book."

She looks thrilled to bits.

"I've decided. I'm taking him under my own tutelage. The other teachers shan't lay a hand on him. There are all sorts of unsavory characters milling about these days—ahem, pardon. Not an appropriate topic for a student."

Professor Kiddy Glasses points straight at Mr. Sweaty. "Listen up, Polkos! You're not to breathe a word of this to anyone. Not even the fact that we had him tested."

“Nobody knows, Doctor. The whole thing was your idea to begin with.”

Wait a sec. Am I only here for this kid professor’s amusement? That’s kinda infuriating.

“Well, that settles that.” She turns to me. “Now then, Haruto. How would you like to join my lab? Let me rephrase: I *insist* you join my lab. It’s the academy’s only research center devoted to Ancient Magic. Your next five years with me will be a fulfilling experience. That I can promise you.”

She looks at me, eyes brimming with anticipation.

I have one word for her:

“No.”

Cr-Crackle. I can almost hear Professor Kiddy Glasses freeze in shock.

Okay, so some weird child professor has her eye on me. But that doesn’t change my mission.

Quite the contrary. Looking back on the travails of these past few days, my will to leave is stronger than ever.

I’m catching up with my copy android in my dorm room. “And there you have it. I’m counting on you.”

I slap my copy on the shoulders. I should do something about his name.

“You’re ‘counting on me’? This from the guy who kicked things *off* by impressing the teacher when we’re supposed to be getting kicked *out* for incompetence?”

“It just happened, okay?”

Turns out the exam I took was at the level of a medical license exam in modern-day Japan. No wonder why I didn't understand any of the questions. But for some reason, the professor was very pleased with the answers I gave based on my off-brand Barrier magic. As for Ancient Magic, it finally dawned on me that the book I'd been studying from was written by the kiddy professor herself.

Fate can be cruel.

"I suppose cleaning up after the original's mess is part of my job," my copy laments.

His cockiness irks me, but I let him have it. I want him in a good mood for now.

Not only can I read my own mind, I can also fool myself. Ha-hah.

Anyway.

It may have gotten off to a rocky start, but Operation Get Expelled ASAP is just getting rolling!

Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dragon Maid (2)

On the morning of our departure for the capital...

I inform Flay and Char that I'll be taking Liza as my attendant.

"Can't I do it, Brother Haruto?!"

"You're the daughter of a noble family. You can't be an attendant," I answer.

My little sister backs down surprisingly quickly. Seems like she was just trying for the hell of it.

"What about me?!" Flay looks desperate, ready to cry tears of blood. "Liza is competent, I won't deny that. And I'm not about to hold myself above her simply because of my seniority. But even still! Even! Still!"

Something inside of Flay snaps, and she explodes into a violent, rackety tantrum. She's not always the token furry friend.

"Calm down, Flay. Some words of wisdom for you: there's a right person for the right job. There are important duties that only you can fulfill. You're the right person to upkeep the safety and security of this region."

"My! Such gracious words you've gifted me, Sir Haruto! Indeed, maintaining public peace has been my longstanding duty. And yet... Hmrff..." Her voice fades into a whimper.

Rather than just rejecting her, I coax her into letting it go by praising her other aspects. A brilliant strategy, if I do say so myself. Even though she'll probably

forget in a few minutes, and beg me again to “please reconsider”!

“No!” Flay screeches. “As your number one servant, Sir Haruto, I simply cannot yield your care to another!”

That was quick. So quick, I’m more impressed than frustrated. That’s our Flay.

Then there’s Liza, my appointed attendant.

“...”

Something seems to be eating at her.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“Well...er...” After a moment of hesitation, she finally says, “Being away from Char and Flay makes me...sad.”

Hearing that, Char’s and Flay’s eyes immediately well up with tears.

“Liza, even when we’re apart, we’ll always be friends.”

“It pains me, too. Mostly, it pains me that you’ve stolen an important assignment from me, but it also pains me that we’ll be separated.”

Flay and Char fling their arms around Liza. Aww, adorable.

But aren’t they forgetting about the Anywhere Door? We can come and go any time we want. I fully intend to do so, at least.

Liza seems confused by their melodrama.

“Um, er... Yes.”

She hugs them back meekly.

“Sir Haruto, I lied,” Liza suddenly confesses.

Where's she going with this?

Char dragged Flay out of the room, urging, "Time to get ready to see them off." Now it's just the two of us.

The little dragon maid explains, "It's true that I'm sad to be separated from those two. But you assured me we'll be coming back here frequently, so I understand that our lives will not be that different."

And yet, there's more on Liza's mind.

"It seems unfair of me to accept the assignment when it matters so much more to Flay..."

True, Flay is genuinely upset. I see why Liza feels conflicted.

"Oh, but... It's not that I don't want to serve you, Sir Haruto."

"I get it."

And I do. The truth is that she's uncomfortable using the teleportation portal of unexplainable mechanics.

But there's one more truth behind Liza's apprehension.

"You're not looking forward to going someplace full of strangers, right?"

"Gulp!"

She actually said the word.

"How did you know?" she squeaks.

"I can see right through you." I act suave, but really, I'm terrible at guessing what others are thinking.

But Liza spent three hundred years hiding away up in a snowy mountain. She's a legend in the shut-in world.

And I'm an aspiring shut-in trying to make it in an alternate world. A pioneer in the shut-in world, in a sense.

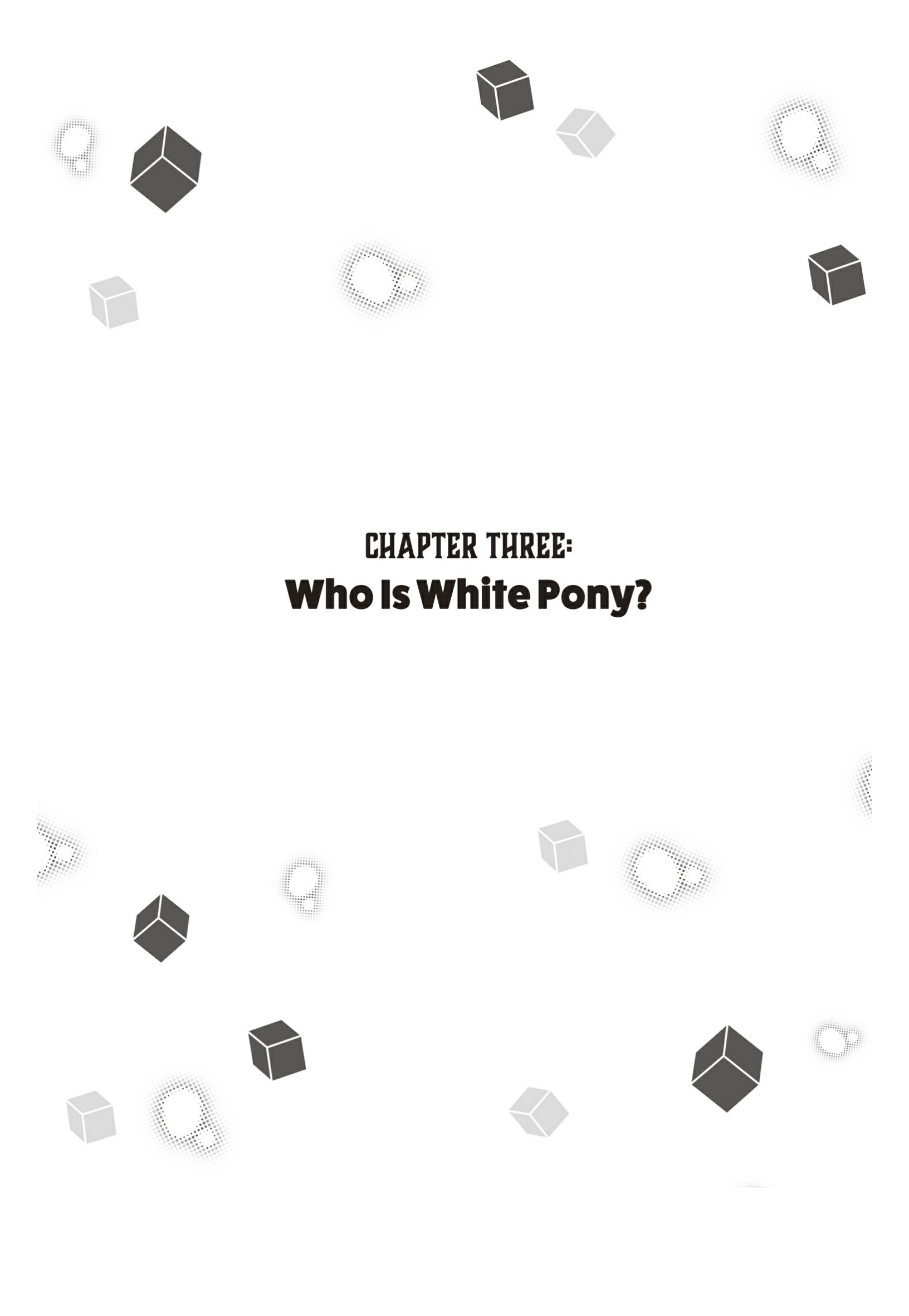
So we have some things in common.

Being in a new environment is a shut-in's nightmare. It's not so bad if you can find a place to be alone. But to be hurled into some trashy community like a school? It's the worst case, worst possible, worst idea ever.

"You're amazing, Sir Haruto. You know everything."

I can't exactly tell her the truth, so I just smile and play along.

Haha. Sorry for lying.

The page is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes. These elements are scattered across the page, with some appearing in the top corners and others near the bottom.

CHAPTER THREE:

Who Is White Pony?

I'm Haruto Zenfis's copy android. My name is Haruto C. I gave myself that name because everyone just calls me "copy." This is my silent act of rebellion.

Right now, I'm in my dorm room, staring vacantly at the wall as I sit on the bed.

The room is spacious, but sparsely furnished. I'll be stationed here for a while, undertaking an enormous mission for my own sake, and for my original's.

My stomach hurts. I don't have one, but that's how I feel. The school's entrance ceremony starts in a few minutes, and I have to attend it.

What if I get harassed by thugs?

What if the girls are like, "Ew, he's gross" behind my back?

What if people start calling me names like "The Ghost" or "Air" when all I'm doing is standing in a corner?

The anxiety is crushing.

Nah, it'll be fine.

This is an elite school. There won't be any thugs. I'm not gross or ugly in this new incarnation. At least, I don't think so. Mean nicknames won't hurt as long as I don't let them.

Besides, I've got Char rooting for me.

"Copy Haruto, may you finish off your stint with honor."

She makes it sound like I'm a yakuza grunt being sent to do some dirty work and then do time in the slammer. I guess school is a kind of prison. For me, at

least.

I reach inside my jacket and pull a gun out of a holster. It's a cool-looking one, with a long, sleek barrel.

My original gave me this magic gun for self-defense.

If anyone's got a problem with me, I'll blast them away!

Not a clever zinger. Now I really sound like a yakuza grunt.

I won't be using the gun, anyway. As they say, a wise man steers clear of danger.

I'll keep a low profile and act like a hopeless idiot. Eventually, the teachers will get fed up and kick me out.

"Here goes." I take a deep breath as I leave my room.

If I had a heart, it would be pounding like crazy right now.

The ceremony was suuuper boring!

Why do high-status people talk so much? Looking down smugly and making pronouncements like "Everyone here is your enemy." As if I don't already know. I slept through most of it.

At least there are no more school events for the rest of the day. Classes start next week, but until then, it's just a bunch of orientation-type stuff.

The academy feels more like a college than a high school. All the classes are electives. You choose what you want to study. As long as you meet a certain number of credits, you'll move up to the next grade.

My interest lies in “How to get expelled.”

I’ve investigated the school system in detail.

If you do nothing for a year, you’re automatically expelled. Even repeating the grade requires a minimum number of credits.

If you fail a magic practicum, you can get sent home in six months. But that’s for students in a combat-focused course for knights and the military.

I’m on the other track: the research course. But likewise, a researcher who can’t use magic is out of the question. If my practical magic score is still too low after one year, I’ll be sent packing.

A year... That’s too long. I don’t want to stick around for a whole year.

But not to worry.

Their system is designed to motivate students with actual talent, those who passed the entrance exam. I got in at the king’s whim. If I make an ass of myself, I’m sure the teachers will be furious.

I’ve definitely got a shot at getting kicked out right away!

For the rest of today, I’ll just lay low in my dorm room to avoid another encounter with that little professor.

Just as I’m about to make a beeline from the crowded main hall to my dorm...

A mob of flashy-looking students is headed straight in my direction!

Leading the gang is a handsome blond guy wearing a gaudy cape. He’s got the pompous stride of a young aristocrat.

Trailing behind him are a dozen or so of his followers. They look like the living embodiment of the term “groupies.”

Smells like trouble. Better steer clear. My instinct tells me so.

I squeeze to the shoulder of the path, hunching to make myself as small as possible. I keep my head down as I pass them slowly. *Don't make eye contact.*

"Hey! Hold it right there, you."

Ulp! That bold voice must belong to the gaudy aristocrat.

"You, there. Boy with the white hair. Or...girl? Halt, I say."

Phew. He's not talking to me. If I look up now and accidentally make eye contact with one of them, I might get sucked in as well. Keeping my head down, I try to sneak past.

Boing.

My face smooshes into something soft. I recognize that feeling. It's what Original Haruto sucked on as a baby.

I stagger back and look up.

A pair of red eyes meets mine.

They belong to a girl with a graceful, well-proportioned face. Her long, platinum-white hair is tied up in a ponytail, contrasting with her black pantsuit. I know she's a girl because her breasts are so big; they look like they're about to pop a button off her jacket. A masc-dressed beauty? Wait a sec... It's the girl who got attacked by the crazed buffalo.

My original ran into her again in the city, but what's she doing here at the academy? Didn't she say she was looking for work?

"You're..." she starts.

"Hey! Didn't you hear me? Halt, I say!"

White Pony turns away from me and looks to the owner of the voice.

The aristocrat guy is stomping towards us, glaring at Pony Girl.

“You’re a freshman, aren’t you? How dare you pass me by without a salutation.”

“Huh?” she says. “But I know you not. I read the academy rules carefully to avoid trouble, but I didn’t see anything about ‘greeting in passing.’ Does it exist as an unwritten rule?”

“You don’t know who I am? The vice president of the student council? Firstborn son of the marquess?”

“I’m from a common background. I’m not familiar with noble etiquette. If it’s necessary for me to know these things for school, I’m willing to learn.”

“Common? A peasant, you say? Well then, no wonder you’re ignorant.”

He glances around at his group, as if seeking affirmation, and they all respond with a derisive snicker.

That should satisfy him, I think.

But instead, he suddenly points in my direction.

“You with the black hair. You’re new too, aren’t you? Tell her who I am.”

“I don’t know.”

Oh, no. His forehead vein is twitching. I guess this is it for me, then. I’m labeled as Ponytail’s friend.

This guy seems to be my senior, and this isn’t really my business. I’ll show myself out.

“Senpai! I have massive diarrhea and I’m about to crap my pants, so please

'scuse me!" I bow deeply and back away. They won't mess with a guy who's about to crap his pants, I'm sure.

"You little... How dare you insult me with such a disgusting lie!"

Oops? Have I angered His Highness?

"Looks like I'll have to teach you a lesson myself. Go on—I'll even give you time to cast a spell. I recommend you use the strongest defense spell you know to endure the pain."

I'm just a copy. I can't use magic.

The gaudy aristocrat starts mumbling to himself. Probably a spell.

I'm about to be served a hearty slice of magic, and it's not even going to taste good. This is just like one of those sports-oriented schools where the senior jocks haze (with magic, in this case) the newbie.

As some wise man once said, better to run and live to fight another day.

I take to my heels and dart off.

BOOM!

An explosion hits my back and sends me tumbling across the ground.

"Hmph. Thought you'd make a run for it, did you? I was right to go easy on you. Go and heal him, someone. Mind you, not too thoroughly. Let the pain remain, so he may reflect on his behavior."

I sit up. *Dang, that made my heart jump.*

My original suited me up with an armor barrier, so I'm completely unscathed. But the barrier only coats my flesh. My clothes are in tatters.

"Whaaaaa?!"

Hm? Mr. Rich Kid is standing there with his mouth wide open, looking like a jackass.

The throng of students watching from afar are starting to whisper.

“He looks totally okay...?”

“But it was a dead-center hit.”

“Was he using defensive magic?”

“No... He didn’t chant anything.”

“Who is he, anyway...?”

Uh, right. My goal is to establish myself as a loser.

I’m supposed to act hurt, in this case. Sheesh, fine. I’ll put on my actor’s mask...



Finally, I, Haruto C, take the hint that I’m supposed to act like I’m in pain.

“Ow! I’m in belated pain... Oh, the pain. It’s so painful. More specifically, it feels like the pain of a bone fracture.”

I scrunch up my face and squirm around. *How’s that? Do I look like I’m suffering?*

“Unbelievable... You shouldn’t be able to stand after being hit by my magic. Even if I did go easy on you. How...”

Seems like my acting isn’t the issue right now.

But he’s distracted. Now’s my chance. *Run for it—*

At that very moment, I spy *her* out of the corner of my eye, engaging in suspicious behavior. She's walking towards Mr. Rich Kid, but then she turns towards me and stops, apparently to think.

It's White Pony; the cause of this whole ordeal. *What's she doing?*

We lock eyes.

She wrinkles her brow, as if in uncertainty. But then she decides to come over to me, her white ponytail swinging behind her.

"I've been assessing the situation and calculating the proper course of action I should take. I believe the first step is to apologize for entangling you in this mess. What do you think?"

Is now really the time for that?

"The other option that occurred to me was to try to appease that man. But I don't know why he's angry. In which case, it's possible I'll make him angrier. Is this correct?"

How should I know?

"Naturally, asking you, 'Are you all right?' also crossed my mind, as well as treating your wounds. But you don't appear to be wounded. So that seems unsuitable in this case."

Wow, and I thought my social skills were bad. Hers are bad on a whole different level.

"I believe the apology should come first. I am truly sorry."

Uh, now's not a good time to be bowing in apology.

But I keep it to myself.

"Why, you... Y-Y-Y-You! You dare to make a mockery of me?!"

Great. I missed my chance to escape.

The infuriated young aristocrat is moving his lips quickly.

A bunch of magic circles appear in the air.

Their centers are glowing brighter and brighter.

“No, Sir Schneidel! That’s too much force. You’ll kill him!”

I’m guessing this is gonna be some lethal magic.

See, this is why school sucks. It’s full of morons who don’t know how to communicate and resort to attacking me, as if I’m the problem.

They’re shit.

Utter shit.

He’s about to hurl his magic at me, and since I’ve got no powers, I’ll never get away in time.

This would be one of those moments where I’d, understandably, defend myself with magic, right?

Back me up, original. Hope you’re ready.

I reach into my tattered jacket and pull the magic gun out of its holster. Shoving Pony Girl aside, I take aim.

“Eat shiiiiit!” Right as the young aristocrat lets out a bloodcurdling howl, I pull the trigger.

Boom! I’m the one impacted by the blast.

My arm that’s not holding the gun recoils, and my body goes somersaulting through the air.

But there’s no pain.

My left sleeve is completely scorched off, but my arm is uninjured. *Nice work, original.*

Luckily, the explosion hurled me behind a hedge, so I get up and make a mad dash away from the scene. I gotta flee before Mr. Rich Kid and his entourage find me.

Come to think of it, whatever happened with my gunshot?

It probably wouldn't work on such a high-level opponent, anyway. But I'd like to think that it at least blinded him for a moment.

Pony Girl can fend for herself. Let Mr. Rich Kid teach her a lesson.

Someone calls to me, "There you are. I've been looking for you, Haruto."

Ugh! It's the little shrimp with the glasses.

"I'm busy right now. Later," I brush her off.

"Oh? There seems to be a commotion on the other side of the hedge. I'm curious to see what that's all about, too. But right now, nothing interests me more than you, Haruto. Allow me to give you a tour of my research lab."

"No."

But I'm a powerless, magicless copy. The tiny professor seizes me without even trying.

"What's with you today? Last time, you were so fast that I couldn't keep up. And your clothes are in shreds, although you don't look injured. Are you feeling unwell?"

That was the original. The copy is a feeble wimp.

So much for my escape. I give in and let her take me. On the bright side, at least nobody will mess with me while I'm with a teacher.

“Aaaaugh!! My shoulder! My arm?!”

I hear shrieking in the distance as I’m being dragged away...



Schneidel Hafen is the eldest son of a marquess.

As a fourth-year student, it vexes him to have to settle for the vice president position of the student council, playing second fiddle to Princess Marianne, who is a year his junior.

So it drives him insane when younger students don’t treat him with respect.

“Why, you... Y-Y-Y-You! You dare to make a mockery of me?!”

The black-haired freshman is completely unscathed—he must have fortified himself with defensive magic. On top of that, he had the gall to put on a clown show of faking an injury—clearly having a laugh at Schneidel’s expense.

I’m going to murder him!

Bloodlust hijacks Schneidel’s rationality.

“No, Sir Schneidel! That’s too much force. You’ll kill him!”

The protests of his entourage pull him back into reality. Nonetheless, he has no intention of abandoning his magic attack now.

I’ll at least blast off one of his arms!

If the boy’s treated quickly enough with healing magic, he’ll likely survive. And if not, so what?

Schneidel’s pride as a nobleman has been hurt. That deserves severe

punishment.

Prince Laius is the only incoming student that Schneidel needs to be careful around. Everyone else, his father the marquess can easily silence with the pull of a string.

Supposedly, the son of a count has enrolled with the king's recommendation this year. But this black-haired kid seems poorly educated, judging from his lack of manners. Far from an aristocratic background.

A peasant family is easy enough to silence with money.

Time to test your luck, boy.

The corners of Schneidel's mouth curl up.

"Eat shiiiiiiit!"

He fires his magic. It's his most powerful attack move, which uses a combination of Fire and Wind magic. The force tears through—leaving no chance for escape—and explodes upon contact. Its destructive power is close to Rank B magic, far beyond the abilities of an ordinary student.

The black-haired kid pulls out a strange object and aims it Schneidel's way, but he utters no spell. *There's no way it's a magic attack.*

In any case, activating defensive magic while producing an attack is an ironclad rule of magic warfare.

Naturally, Schneidel is also deploying his defensive magic. There are only a few students in the entire school who can penetrate it—Marianne being one of them.

Ka-ting! An icy sound reverberates.

Splut. Followed by a dull drop. Just as he hears it, Schneidel feels an intense

pain flash from his right shoulder into his entire body.

Mangled flesh.

Shattered bone.

Schneidel is blasted backwards, mowing down a few of his entourage in the process.

“Aaaaugh!! My shoulder! My arm?!”

The impact to his right shoulder is so intense, he can hardly believe that his arm wasn’t blown off.

“Sir Schneidel! Stay focused. I’ll treat the wound!”

The frantic voices feel so distant.

If you’re going to heal me, get on with it, you imbeciles!

Alongside the anger, a question pops into his mind. How did he get injured so badly?

What did that kid do?

Nothing. He couldn’t possibly have done anything.

That girl with the white hair...?

No, not her either. If she’d tried to pull something, one of his groupies would’ve noticed.

As he’s about to slip out of consciousness, Schneidel racks his brain and arrives at one conclusion:

A hidden conspirator must have assisted the kid. It’s the only possible explanation.

Schneidel would never lose one-on-one.

He isn't sure if his attack hit the black-haired kid. But if he's still alive, he's in for it.

I'm one of God's chosen. Next time...he'll pay! Schneidel screams inside.

But he blacks out, unable to utter a word.



Duels are an outdated custom that belong in the past. Or do I only feel that way because there's a bit of modern-day Japanese values left in me?

On the day of the school's entrance ceremony, I get an emergency notification from my copy. I hurry to my dorm room to find him in shambles.

As I shrink him back into a sexy-babe figurine, I download his memory. I see. He's spent the last three hours listening to Professor Kiddy Glasses's solicitations and bragging.

Poor guy. You did really well. You deserve a good rest.

I review the whole kerfuffle with the older student, too. Just as I finish, someone comes to tell me that there's a girl outside waiting to see me. I head to the dorm lobby.

The messenger is a friendly-looking older student with freckles. She's a groupie of the guy who messed with my copy.

"—In conclusion," she says sternly, "Sir Schneidel Hafen hereby challenges Haruto Zenfis to a duel. Report to the academy's battle arena two eves from today. I await your response."

"No thanks."

“What?! Are you saying you refuse? This is a formal challenge, presented to you in accordance with noble etiquette.”

“I don’t really know what that means. But you can go ahead and tell everyone that I ran away with my tail between my legs.”

If my reputation gets worse, it’ll only help me to get expelled sooner. She’d be doing me a favor, actually.

“You realize that if you decline an official challenge to a duel without a legitimate reason, it doesn’t just reflect poorly on you. You will also sully the name of your father, Count Zenfis. Is that what you want?”

Is that how it works?

I can’t have that. I don’t care what people think about me, but I don’t want any trouble for my dad.

“I was born weak, so I’m really not cut out for magic duels.”

“Then you should leave the academy right away. If you’re that physically fragile, you won’t last five years here.”

“I’d love nothing more.”

“What?”

“Uh, I mean... My grandmother’s dying wish was for me to refuse any challenges to... Never mind.”

The girl glares so hard that I drop my excuse.

“Are you done clowning around?”

“Fine, then,” I yield. “I accept. But tell him to go easy enough on me that I don’t die.”

“Don’t tell me...you’re intending to lose on purpose? I dare you to try it. You’ll disgrace the Zenfis name worse than if you refuse.”

You’ve gotta be kidding me...

“At any rate, having accepted the duel, you better take it seriously and give it your best. Sir Schneidel will not have it any other way.”

With that, the errand girl turns on her heel and leaves.

Well, isn’t this a real pain.

Of course, my copy isn’t to be blamed one bit. This entire thing is that jerk Schneidel’s fault, along with that socially awkward white-ponytail girl.

Speaking of Ponytail Girl...

I glance to the side and spot her hiding in the bushes. I can see half her face peeking this way.

She hasn’t addressed me, so I’m not going to acknowledge her.

I pretend I don’t notice her and return to my room.

So, the duel. Yes, the duel.

I said I’d accept, so there’s no backing out now. Even if it was just a verbal agreement. But now the question is, how do I handle this?

I don’t even know if I can win.

This guy, Mr. Rich Kid, is an elite. As the vice president of the student council, he’s gotta be pretty capable, right?

On the other hand, his murder-intended attack didn’t even put a dent in my copy.

Meanwhile, my copy's attack must've done zero damage, since Mr. Rich Kid's ready to duel in two days.

Based on the aforementioned clues, I'm guessing that Mr. Rich Kid is stronger at defense than offense.

If neither of us can inflict any damage, the duel will just turn into a stalemate.

Also, I can't afford to win this duel. If I defeat an elite opponent in public, it'll knock me off the course of getting expelled for poor performance.

I have to suffer a humiliating defeat, and without getting injured. Complicated stuff.

Time to start gathering info.

I'll start by finding out Schneidel's mana level and elements, and devise a plan from there.

I'm already on it.

Before the errand girl took off, I stuck a tracker barrier on her.

Next, I conjure up a surveillance barrier and connect it to the tracker barrier. It flies through the wall to where she is.

Pulling up the visuals on the monitor... *There she is.* Her back is turned. But... what's this? There's someone with her.

A tomboyish beauty with a white ponytail. It's the socially inept girl. What's she doing?

Before the surveillance barrier can pick up their voices, the two girls walk away.

Did they form a truce? Before I could get any clarity, the two girls exit the main gate of the academy, and board a horse-drawn carriage. For the entire

ride, neither of them speaks a word.

Apparently, Mr. Rich Kid lives at his family property in the central area of the capital. My dad has a second home around there, too, but since I'm not planning to stay for long, I chose to live in the dorm instead.

Setting that aside, Pony Girl is escorted inside by the errand girl, and shown into a large hall.

Schneidel is sitting in a swanky-looking chair. It's late in the evening, but his groupies are all present. A female attendant stands next to him, placing a hand over his right shoulder. She seems to be focusing intently. I wonder what that's about.

Errand Girl whispers something to Schneidel.

"Cancel the duel, you say?" he winces at Pony Girl.

"Correct," the white-haired girl affirms. "This predicament is solely my fault. I don't want to cause that boy any more trouble. Also, you appear to be severely wounded. Even if you do manage to heal completely in two days, there will be a tremendous gap in your abilities—"

"Silence! You were there to watch. How could you not see?" Schneidel bellows.

"Not see what?"

"There was someone else there, aside from you and him. Some third party was assisting him."

Is that so. Some other skilled fighter was there, huh.

Gee, I wonder who. But Mr. Rich Kid, you look pretty beaten up. Which must

mean this servant girl is healing him. I see, I see. Well, how about that. Wounded. Heh heh heh.

“I didn’t detect a third party’s presence,” Pony Girl answers. “I believe you were injured by that mysterious weapon he used. It happened very fast, so I cannot say for sure.”

Huh? My copy’s attack wasn’t a miss? Someone please clear this up for me.

“At any rate,” she asserts, “there is no need for you to fight him. Can you please rescind the challenge?”

“You are tenacious. Tell me, did he send you here to beg for his life?”

“No. He seems to be avoiding me. I haven’t had the chance to speak with him since.”

“Hmph. I have no reason to believe you. And before all else, that’s not how you ask a favor of a nobleman. The least you could do is grovel,” Schneidel sneers. A wave of jeering ripples through his entourage.

However...

“I understand. I apologize for my ignorance.” Without the slightest hesitation, Pony Girl kneels and presses her forehead to the floor. “I beg you. Please rescind your challenge.”

“What a bore,” the aristocrat scoffs. “There’s no point in begging if you feel not the slightest iota of humiliation. Did you think you could placate me so easily, you fool— *Yeowch!*”

Mr. Rich Boy lets out a howl—apparently caused by a stab of pain from his injury.

“Concentrate, you imbecile!” he hisses, glaring at the girl treating his wound.

“I...I’m so sorry, sir!”

This guy really is a classic douchebag.

Pony Girl rises to her feet, her expression troubled.

“I apologize for my lack of manners. What can I do to quell your anger?”

“Since you ask... I suppose you can dance naked for me.”

The idea seems to have just popped into his head, but Mr. Rich Kid’s lackeys are already getting excited.

“I...may have some hesitation to that.”

So Pony Girl has a sense of humiliation. It’s a bit surprising—she’s always so calm and composed.

Schneidel snickers, “If you do a very good job, I may consider your request.”

Oh, come on! He’s so obvious. After she dances for him, he’s going to look down his nose haughtily and laugh, “*I changed my mind, the answer is no!*”

Not that I care if Pony Girl humiliates herself.

Anyways, I just came up with a great idea.

“Very well,” she says. “If it’s the only way to appease your anger.”

Pony Girl reaches for the top button of her jacket. I guess she really is reluctant—for once, her hands are shaking.

I turn off my monitor and rise to my feet.

I change into my black superhero uniform and become...

...the dark hero, the harbinger of justice—Shiva AKA the Black Knight AKA Schwartz Kreiger.

And as for my great idea...

Having accepted the duel, I have no choice but to go through with it.

But if my opponent is in no condition to fight, there won't be a duel.



The white-haired girl takes her time removing her jacket. Her chest becomes even more noticeable to Schneidel.

For a peasant, she has poise.

Schneidel has never lacked female attention, but he finds himself enticed by the way this girl carries herself.

Her hand reaches down to her belt. Even the women in Schneidel's entourage hold their breaths at the sensual metallic clinks of her buckle.

Her trousers silently fall to the floor. But her thighs are still veiled by her long shirttail.

She begins to unbutton her shirt, starting from the bottom. Her motion slows down even more, rousing Schneidel's irritation.

"What's the matter? Your hands are shaking. Shall I have my boys give you a hand?"

One of the burly guys in Schneidel's group cackles.

"No, thank you," she responds forbearingly. After she opens her shirt up to its midsection, she reaches for the top button and works her way down, one by one.

Now the cleavage of her voluptuous chest is revealed...and finally, she opens

the last button. At that precise moment...

“What?! Where’d the lights go?”

...Schneidel’s vision suddenly goes black.

“Eeh?!” The girl who was treating his wound lets out a short yelp, and is heard no more.

“Hey! What’s this all about? Hurry up and turn the lights back on!”

Nobody responds to his angry demand.

Schneidel, unwilling to wait for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, immediately stands up and tries to look around.

“Huh?”

As he turns, he notices his unusual surroundings.



He sees his chair.

It's the chair he was sitting in. It's there, unquestionably. He holds his left hand up. He can see it, too. Looking down, he can see his clothes, as well.

But everything else is completely black.

It's not the lights that caused a blackout. His surroundings literally turned black. He's able to see without any source of light. *How is this possible?*

"What's going on? Hey! Is anyone out there?"

Where the darkness begins and where it ends is a blur. He stretches his arm out and walks to the spot where the white-haired girl was. He hits a wall. A pitch-black wall.

"What the hell's going on here?"

He feels around the wall—

"Dammit!"

—and punches it.

Bloop.

"Yeek?!"

A black object, shaped like a human head, pokes out of the facade. Schneidel jumps back.

Emerging from the darkness is the rest of the object: a man dressed in black from head to toe.

"My bad," the stranger says. "My hands were full over there. All I did was ask her to get dressed, but then she grilled me with a million questions. I swear, that girl doesn't get what 'appropriate' means."

His laid-back tone seems out of place for this bizarre situation. His voice is unnerving, like layers of many voices mixed into one.

“Whoops. I forgot to get into character. Ehem... The wait is over!”

“Who are you?!”

“I am the hero of the shadows, the harbinger of justice rising from the darkness. The Black Knight! Also known as Shiva.”

“You...you clown! How did you get into my chamber? Who do you think I am? I’m Schneidel Hafen, heir to the Hafen house.”

Schneidel murmurs a quick spell under his breath, fighting the pain in his injured shoulder.

The dark figure interrupts, “Too late. The moment I enclosed you in this cage, my setup was complete. It’s too late to attack or defend yourself. I’m not going to let you.”

What’s he talking about? Just as Schneidel wonders to himself... “Augh!!”

A searing pain stabs through his right shoulder. He reaches for it and quickly understands the man’s words.

“Wh-What is this?”

But he still doesn’t understand the situation.

There’s something hard fastened to his right shoulder. Something invisible. One in the front, one in the back. They seem to be roughly the size of a fist, and shaped like disks.

The two objects are pressing into his wound.

The mysterious man holds up three fingers. “You will now stand trial on three cr—”

“Answer my questions!” Schneidel interrupts. “What the hell is going on? Who are y—Nghaaaa!!”

The disks grind into his shoulder wound from both sides, and Schneidel thrashes to the ground.

“Can’t you see I’m talking?” the shadowy man warns. “It’s not polite to interrupt. Also, I’m not going to answer your questions.”

The disk-like objects loosen. But with the throbbing pain distracting him, Schneidel is unable to cast a spell or think of a way to fight back.

“Now, let me start over. Your first crime is intimidating a freshman with your outrageous demands and causing a scene. What’s the deal with that school, anyway? Is it some lawless hood where anyone can just throw down in a magic battle whenever they want?”

Schneidel decides to ride out the pain, and watch for an opening.

The wounded aristocrat stammers, “I-It’s the upperclassmen’s duty to ‘guide’ the miseducated newcomers. I am the next head of the Hafen family, and vice president of the student council. I am entitled to take such measures.”

He’s lying.

Students aren’t allowed to engage in magic battles on campus—or off-campus, for that matter. But there are means to get around this rule. Schneidel has always used his political power to clean up after his messes. Until now, that is.

The man in black sighs, “Ugh, I can’t stand the self-important jock types. I won’t tolerate them. A school should be a safe and peaceful learning space for everyone.” He crosses his fingers to make an X, forgetting all about putting on a persona.

“Your second crime is the duel thing. You could’ve just called it a draw. But

instead, you insisted on using your social rank to publicly flog a vulnerable freshman. That's too low. No bueno. I find you guilty of violating public morals."

"Preposterous! Defending the honor of my family name is the formal etiquette of nobility—"

"Hey, I'm doing the judging here. Based on my standards. My rules. If I say you're guilty, you're guilty."

"But that's tyranny!"

"It's what you do to others, right? Now that the same rules apply to you, you're whining? That's lame, man."

"Augh! You..." Schneidel swallows his urge to dispute. For now, he's better off not provoking the man.

"The third crime—I'm just tacking this on for the hell of it—is sexual harassment. Making a girl dance naked for you? I can't believe you even said that out loud. Have you no shame?"

"Are you involved with that girl?"

"Nope. Don't know her. I don't even know her name."

Schneidel realizes how odd it is that he doesn't know her name, either.

A member of the peasantry would have to possess exceptional abilities to be accepted to Granfelt. Not to mention that the girl stood out with her striking beauty and oddball personality.

Why hasn't he heard of her before? Perhaps her grades were barely passing?

"As punishment for these three crimes, you'll be wearing those 'vice blocks' for a while. If you try to take them off or treat the wound, the vice will immediately activate. So be careful. I will allow you to stop the bleeding, at

least. The idea isn't to kill you."

"Wh-What..."

"The vice will also engage if you attempt to use magic. Can't duel with that, can you? You'll want to retract that challenge. I assume you don't want to humiliate yourself."

Schneidel freezes, dumbfounded. He replays the man's words in his head a few times before a smile rises to his face.

"Ha...hahahaha! What a joke. I don't know what kind of magic this is, but you're not claiming to have the mana to maintain it for days, are you?"

Most people couldn't sustain even the simplest barrier for a day without their mana running out. A large-scale barrier like the one protecting the royal castle takes dozens of practitioners working in shifts and leveraging ley lines.

"If you don't believe me, test it out tomorrow morning. Until I decide to free you, that's how you'll remain."

Bullshit, he thinks, but doesn't dare to say it out loud.

The man does seem to wield magic that Schneidel has never seen or heard of before, and his tone sounds wholly confident. And yet...

This can't be. I refuse to believe it! Schneidel grits his teeth.

For a sorcerer to be stripped of his magical abilities is utter humiliation.

To be defeated by some unknown man without ever knowing what hit him is downright unbearable.

But technically, his power hasn't been stripped from him.

The man only said, "If you attempt."

Pain is meant to be withstood and fought against.

In that case...

Schneidel begins to chant a spell.

“Nghaaaaaa! Ow, oww, aaaaaauugh!”

Intense pain floods his right shoulder and blazes through his entire body. Schneidel collapses and writhes on the floor.

“Were you listening to anything I just said?” the man in black derides. “But you get it now, don’t you? I expect you to be on your best behavior for a while. When you show real remorse, I’ll free you.”

With that, the man disappears into the wall.

Schneidel lies in the middle of his dark world.

The heir to a prominent name in the aristocracy, the vice president of the student council, is lying on the floor in a puddle of his own piss.

Disgraceful. Utterly disgraceful.

He couldn’t bear to let anyone see him like this. At least he’s alone in the pitch-blackness.

How much time has passed? Five minutes? An hour? Perhaps not even a minute.

Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the black world vanishes.

“Sir Schneidel!”

“Are you all right?”

“Good heavens, you look disheveled...”

“Hurry, treat his wound!”

His pitiful state is now in full view. The man in black and the girl with white hair are gone.

His groupies sit him up.

One of them looks down at Schneidel’s lower body and notices something.

“You’re...wet?”

“Wait... Did he...?”

“Is that...?”

“Sir Schneidel...?”

In the midst of the awkwardness, a servant puts her hands over his right shoulder to heal him. She chants an incantation and a faint light glows under her palm.

“Aauuuuugh!! S-S-Stop! D-Don’t heal... Sto-o-o-op!”

He shoves the girl away and crawls around the floor in his wet trousers.

His groupies are dumbstruck by his pitiful display, but not for long. Someone lets out a stifled snicker.

“Shh, don’t.”

“That’s rude!”

“Yeah, but look at him...”

The quiet chuckles plunge Schneidel into shame even further.

Absolutely wretched...

At this point, he can’t even summon the energy to be angry. Schneidel’s consciousness sinks deep into the darkness...



My copy has decided to go on strike.

I understand. The day of the entrance ceremony was a shitshow.

Getting abducted by Little Miss Kiddy Glasses was the straw that broke the camel's back. He had to listen to her prattle on for three hours. No wonder he's traumatized.

I'd go on strike, too, if it were me. Oh, right. He is me. Well, there you go.

Still, I don't want to get kicked out for being a shut-in in my dorm. That'd make my dad look bad. I'm trying to pin the blame on the king for misjudging my abilities and recommending me to the school in the first place.

My copy and I negotiated on the working conditions until dawn. We agreed to take turns on a full-day shift.

Yesterday, it was my copy's turn. So today, it's mine.

Boohoo. I don't wanna go, doc.

But I have to. I got called into the teachers' office.

They want to discuss the brouhaha from yesterday. Even though none of it was my fault.

So...

"I'm ready to drop..."

The interrogation took a whole hour. Ten teachers swarmed around me. Not

as bad as Professor Kiddy Glasses, but still exhausting.

The stakes are high for me, too. If I get expelled for misconduct, it'll reflect poorly on my dad's reputation.

I decided to stick to my excuse of "I was just totally overwhelmed, and I don't know what happened."

But surprisingly...

"You're quite impressive. You managed to turn the tables on that Hafen boy."

"He's been quite a troublemaker lately. Attending those sketchy meetings and such."

"I'll bet you taught Marquess Hafen's half-wit son a good lesson. Er... Don't tell anyone I said that."

"Punishment? Oh, no. We're not going to punish you."

"We all know you were the victim here. There were plenty of witnesses."

"And he was the only one injured. We don't consider that excessive self-defense."

"But are you sure your mana level's only a 2? Maybe get it checked again?"

The rest of the discussion focused on how I managed to dodge Mr. Rich Kid's attacks and defeat him. I didn't want them to know about my weird Barrier magic, so I just played stupid. I was pretty worn out by the end.

For a guy who's hoping to get kicked out of school for failing, I seem to have gotten all the teachers' expectations up. Thanks a lot, Rich Kid.

They finally let me go. As I walk across campus, I notice some students

loitering here and there. Classes are in session already.

All the freshmen, including me, are still doing orientation. The older students are trying to recruit the new students for clubs and stuff.

Speaking of orientation, I'm not sure what we're supposed to do.

I'll just play roll-the-pen and go with whatever classes it lands on, since I'm not sticking around for long. So really, there's no reason for me to be wandering the campus today.

The older students, and some freshmen are looking at me with a gleam in their eyes.

I don't want people trying to recruit me for anything, so I decide to head back to my room.

As I'm turning around, I announce, "No thank you."

"You didn't even see me and you're already turning me down? Do you have eyes on the back of your head, Haruto?"

It's the fun-sized professor, otherwise known as Professor Tear. Despite my well-in-advance refusal, she scurries in front of me and blocks my path.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I may have talked too much. So, how about it? Want to join my research lab?"

"You sure don't seem sorry."

"Hahaha! Well, I'm desperate, you see. If my research lab goes another year without a single student on the roster," she agonizes, "its survival may be in peril..."

Great. Now she's glum.

"Say, instead of standing here talking, why don't we take this over to my lab? I

have some nice tea. There's snacks, too, if you're hungry."

"I'll pass."

"Come, now. Don't be shy. You haven't chosen your curriculum yet, have you? Why not come study with me?"

"Curriculum?"

"Weren't you listening to anything I said yesterday? Come to think of it, your eyes were like a dead fish's, and all you said was 'uh huh' and 'mmhmm.'"

Professor Tear drops her shoulders and sighs dramatically. "Do you remember me saying 'training program' and 'research program'?"

"Not the first one."

"What about when I explained how this academy is divided into two curriculums? The knight's course and researcher's course?"

"Vaguely."

The knight's course trains students for combat. They're the future knights and soldiers of the kingdom's military force. Their program focuses on the practical implementation of magic.

The researcher's course is for students pursuing a labwork-focused career. Their objective is developing new magic and exploring ways to maximize its use.

I'm in the latter group, I think.

"A research lab is exactly what it sounds like. You burrow up in a room and immerse yourself in magic research. My lab is one of them. At a training center, you'd be training under practiced veterans on how to implement your magic."

Apparently, every student is required to join one of these training centers or research labs.

But the academy's pretty flexible about it.

You can transfer as many times as you like, and you can even switch courses. It's not unusual for a research student to join a training center to practice their magic skills. The opposite is just as common.

"You want to join a research lab, don't you?"

"I don't really care."

"Hmm. You do seem to have strong practical magic skills. I heard about the whole predicament yesterday. Not too shabby. You certainly taught that snooty little brat a thing or two."

"It wasn't me. Apparently, someone else was lending a hand."

"Is that true? In any case, you're the talk of the campus today. 'The freshie who got in with the king's referral is off to a blazing start,' I hear."

"Wha...?" I choke.

"Wh-What's the matter? You look like a Hell Hound whose dinner was stolen."

What, like, ferociously angry? No, that's not it. I'm pretty sure my expression right now is "despair."

I try to eavesdrop on some of the students nearby.

"Hey, isn't that him? It's the guy who clobbered Sir Schneidel!"

"I heard it was a one-hit KO."

"Apparently, he's Count Zenfis's son."

"He's kinda cute."

"Should we invite him to have lunch together?"

“Hey, there you are. I’ve been looking all over for you, Haruto!”

Crap. So that’s why it feels like I’m being stared at since this morning. Well, they’re wrong. It was just a stroke of lu— Wait... Who was that last one?

I glance in the direction of the voice.

Voosh!

A beefy-looking dude with the physique of a rugby player swings a fist at me.

Shoop. I step to the side. I grab his wrist, twist it behind his back, and knock him to the ground.

“That was uncalled for. What do you want?”

“Heh. Nice one, Haruto! Sorry. I knew you could dodge it easily, so, you know—just my way of saying hello.”

I don’t know who this guy is, but he’s being way too chummy.

“C’mon, stop looking at me like I’m a freak. Don’t you remember? It’s me, Laius.”

Wait, the name does ring a bell. I tilt my head in thought, just as Professor Tear chimes in.

“This is His Highness, Prince Laius,” she explains, standing next to me. “A well-known member of the royal family. But isn’t he also a relative of yours, Haruto?”

“Wha...?”

“Hey, don’t give me that disappointed look!” he barks.

This big buff bro in front of me was once that edgy little brat? I can’t believe we come from the same gene pool. As his big brother, I must say, this is

depressing.

“Honestly, who says hello like that?” A voice chimes in from behind. “I apologize for Laius’s behavior, Haruto. It’s been too long.”

I release Laius. A beautiful woman helps him to his feet and curtsies politely at me.

“I know who you are, Princess Marianne,” I say.

“You forgot me but remember her?!”

Yeah, well, Princess Marianne looks just how I’d imagine she’d grow to be. From a poised little doll to a stunning beauty. As her younger brother, I must say, I’m proud. Even though we have different mothers.

Setting that aside.

“Hey, look! He slammed His Highness the Prince to the ground.”

“The prince who got top marks on the physical test of the entrance exam...”

“The guy’s unbelievable.”

“He’s something else, all right.”

No, it’s not like that. The prince was probably going easy on me. Probably. Right?

Why do things keep happening that boost my reputation? I wonder bitterly.



“Wild LITTLE BROTHER appeared! LITTLE BROTHER suddenly attacked! Haruto slammed him to the ground!”

Press A.

“Wild BIG SISTER appeared! BIG SISTER smiled sweetly!”

...is roughly where we're at right now. Moments before, I was captured by Professor Kiddy Glasses.

Things are starting to get rowdy.

Laius gives me a proud grin, as if he's forgotten all about being pinned down by me a few seconds ago.

“I heard you defeated the heir of the Hafen house. Nice work! As expected of the guy who won against me.”

“Schneidel's behavior has been out of line lately. I hope he takes this lesson to heart and shapes up,” my sister adds.

“Wow, Haruto. You beat the prince in a fight, too?” the professor lauds. “Prince Laius has, by orders of magnitude, the strongest physical abilities of this year's freshmen.”

“That was when we were kids.”

I haven't gotten much stronger since then. I'm a little more handy with my Barrier magic, but that's about it.

On the other hand, Laius's mana level is more than double what it was back then. His skills are, no doubt, far and away greater than before.

Whispers buzz around us.

The other students are reacting to what Laius just said. Our little brawl just now was one thing, but the fact that I'd beaten him in an actual fight seems to be causing quite a stir.

I don't want the rumors to get any more inflated, so I change the subject.

“How may I be of service?” I ask politely.

“Oh, come on. We’re in the same grade. No need to be so formal,” Laius says.

“I was addressing the princess.”

“Hey, what the hell, man!”

“Laius, no need to shout. Haruto, we came to talk to you about something. Have you chosen your course yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Awesome!” Laius exclaims. “You can join the same one as me. It’s a really tough training center—they’re brutal, but you’ll get super strong!”

“No! Haruto, you should join the same research lab as me. You’ll be working in the most cutting-edge facility. A fulfilling experience, I assure you,” Marianne offers.

“Hold it right there,” Professor Tear interrupts. “I called dibs on Haruto. I’m not going to hand him over just because you’re from the royal family. In fact, leveraging your social standing at school is out of bounds.”

Laius draws closer, invading my personal space with his burliness.

“Hey, Haruto—who’s this little kid?”

“Hmph, how rude. I’m not a little kid. My name is Tearietta Luseiannel. I’m a professor at this academy. Ancient Magic is my area of expertise.”

“O-Oh... My apologies. But I don’t think this is about who called dibs. I’m not gonna back down just because you’re a professor.”

This is a surprise. When we last met, Laius was an entitled brat, but he seems to have matured and learned some manners. As his big brother, I’m...neither proud nor disappointed. I don’t care about him.

“Hey, I just remembered something.” Laius leans closer to whisper in my ear. “Professor Luseiannel is kinda notorious. She spends all her time researching moldy, outdated topics with no results to show for it, and she’s always butting heads with the other professors. Look, for your own sake—anyplace would be better than her lab.”

“Prince Laius, I can hear you.” Professor Tear looms over us. “My results aren’t the problem. It’s the dimwits who aren’t capable of comprehending them!”

“See? That’s what you’ll be dealing with.”

“What? You wanna fight, you jerk?!”

Professor Kiddy Glasses bristles like a blown-up pufferfish, and my big sister steps in to deflate her anger.

“There, there. However, I have no intention of relinquishing Haruto, either. I’m sorry, Professor Luseiannel.”

“Tear is fine, Your Highness. But nope! Haruto is mine.”

“Hell no! Haruto’s coming with me.”

Before I know it, they’re getting into a tug-o-war over me.

What’s worse—

“Hey, you hear that? He’s still undecided.”

“Let’s go recruit him.”

“But he’s with the prince and princess...”

“Yeah, but there’s that little kid, too... Let’s just go for it.”

—the mob is escalating. I’d better get out of here before things get out of

control.

““““Wait a minute!”””” all three of them shout.

“This whole time, some weird girl...”

“...with white hair has been circling around us...”

“Haruto, do you know her...?”

Uhh, yeah. I’ve noticed, too. It’s the tomboyish girl with the white ponytail.

“Ah, I remember her!” Professor Tear exclaims. “The peasant girl who got the highest score on the written exam. She bombed the applied magic portion, though, so her overall score was barely above average. But she has a good grasp of Ancient Magic, so I have my eye on her. I was so focused on you, Haruto, that I almost forgot. Er, let me see... What was her name...?”

If you have your eye on that girl, go pester her and leave me alone. But while she’s here...

“Actually, I have plans with her.”

...I’ll use her as my escape.

“Also, which course to take is for me to decide, so please stop your solicitations,” I declare. Sprinting off, I grab Pony Girl by the arm.

“Hey, did you see that guy? He rejected the prince and princess.”

“He flat-out turned them down. That takes balls.”

“I could never do that.”

“Amazing!”

Please stop making a big deal out of every little thing I do. From my POV, they’re basically relatives close to my age. Technically, we’re siblings. But that’s

a secret.

Professor Tear tries to stop me. “Wait, Haruto! Hey, what are you—”

“Come on, leave him alone.”

Nice one, Laius. You hold her back while I get away.

“Gah! I’m not giving up! I’m—”

Their voices fade as I pull Pony Girl along.



We reach a wooded area on campus. This school is ridiculously huge.

“Thanks,” I tell Pony Girl. “I appreciate that, but I’m done with you. You’re free to go.”

“I don’t understand this situation at all,” the White-Haired Ponytail Girl replies. “But since we’re here, I would like to speak with you.”

Ignoring social cues, as usual.

She carries on, “I am somewhat confused right now. And the source of my confusion is mainly you.”

“Huh? Me?”

There she goes again with her weird—

“Yes. Are you the same person as you were yesterday?”

The “switch” inside me flips on.

Instinctively, I cage us in a thirty-foot-wide, dome-shaped barrier. It’s camouflaged so that nobody on the outside can see us. Soundproofed, as well. It’s a solid prison, impenetrable from the inside or out.

I just can’t let it slide this time. Besides, Char’s not here.

The girl’s expression stiffens. Her eyes glance from side to side, then up.

“Is this...a barrier? It’s impressive,” she swallows.

“You can see it?”

My distrust towards her grows stronger. The only other person who’s ever been able to see one of my barriers is the Flash Princess. Although I didn’t confirm it with her.

In any case...

“No. I’m certainly not capable of seeing such a perfect barrier. It’s not that I can physically feel it either—more like I can vaguely ‘sense’ a barrier. I have to concentrate very hard, though, or I’d lose track of it.”

Still, she’s keener than Flay or Liza, and they’re demons.

Is she just intuitive? Maybe that’s why she can tell me and my copy apart? I don’t know. I should ask.

“I seem different from yesterday?”

“Hm? Oh, that—I’m sorry if I spoke out of line.”

“Never mind that. Just answer me.”

“Uh, okay. Well, to be more precise, my impression is the same as the first time I met you that day on the street. But yesterday, I didn’t sense the slightest

mana from you. The mana I sensed from you on the first day and what I'm feeling now are so intense, the force alone could blow me away."

"So it's not how I look or anything?"

"You look the same. That's why it's mystifying."

Hmm. She's right—my copy has no mana. Therefore, he can't use magic.

But Flay and Liza are the only ones who've ever described my mana as a "force." Johnny and Gigan have too, but they're summoned monsters.

"Are you a demon?" I ask.

"I'm curious to know how you came to that conclusion, but for now, I will simply answer your question. I am human. I must be."

As usual, she has a weird way of putting things.

"Okay, whatever, then. You wanted to talk to me? What is it?"

For now, I turn off my "switch," but I leave the dome barrier up. I don't want Professor Kiddy Glasses glomming onto me again.

The girl (come to think of it, I still don't know her name, but it's probably too awkward to ask now) looks straight at me and says, "I want to apologize and thank you, and then I have a request."

That's a lot.

"First, the apology. I'm very sorry I involved you in my troubles yesterday. I apologized about that yesterday, too, but then you were attacked again by that older student. After that, you were challenged to a duel. All of this was my fault for not knowing how to behave properly. I am truly sorry."

The girl bows her head deeply, and straightens herself slowly.

“And then, just before he attacked, you pushed me out of the way. I can’t see a reason for why you took that action, but in any case, you saved me. I thank you.”

Saving her certainly wasn’t the intention. My copy just shoved her because she was in the way.

“And lastly, my request...”

The girl furrows her brow in hesitation. Then, she straightens up and blurts out:

“Will you please be friends with me?”

I don’t know what’s going on.

Out of nowhere, she pitches, *Please be my friend!*

To which I blankly respond:

“Uh...huh?”

“Thank you! I hear you’re the son of an important family. It’s extremely gracious of you to be friends with a peasant like myself.”

Wait, I didn’t mean to agree.

“Hold on,” I exclaim. “Why, though? Tell me the reason.”

“Of course, I fully intended to,” she replies. “I’m afraid I may upset you again, because it’s entirely for my own selfish purpose. But I will do my best to express it with sincerity.”

“Briefly, if possible.”

“I will do my best. Very well...”

The girl presses a hand to her large chest, and uneasily, she begins to tell her story.

“I was abandoned shortly after birth. Someone took me in, but then I was abandoned again. That happened four times altogether. Eventually, I ended up at a monastery in the south side of the kingdom.”

Wow. That’s heavy. But somewhat relatable.

“Four times is a lot to be abandoned.”

“I don’t know the reason,” she says, “but every place that took me in called me a ‘demon.’ Perhaps it’s because of how I look, or because I was able to talk as a newborn. In any case, everyone was afraid of me.”

Obviously because of the talking newborn thing.

But maybe it’s not that rare in this world. Come to think of it, Flay didn’t seem too surprised talking to me when I was a baby. I don’t know.

“Even at the monastery, I was an outcast. The only person who was kind to me was the priest who died when I was five years old. The succeeding priest detested me, though.”

It’s a tragic tear-jerker of a story, but she tells it so stoically. Not a trace of pathos.

“The monastery was very closed off from the world. We had no contact with anyone outside. That’s why I lack common sense in social interactions.”

Oh, you’re aware of that.

I get the idea. “So, you want to be friends and learn about basic social skills?”

“Yes.” She nods, smiling.

I've got bad news for her.

"You've made a fatal error in choosing the right candidate. I hate to say it, but I have no friends. I grew up as a shut-in way out in the borderlands. I probably know as much about social interaction as you do."

"That's perfect. We can learn about basic human interactions together!"

Her smile is so sincere, I can't help but feel a bit moved.

"Hell no! If two social awks gang up together, it'll just be the blind leading the blind."

"Oh... Do you suppose so?"

But wait, I think.

My experiences with friendship were always of this variety:

"Hey, we're friends, right?"

"We're hungry. Go buy us some sandwiches."

"With your money, of course."

"That's what friends are for."

Relationships that involved me running errands and obeying outrageous demands.

She's caused nothing but trouble for me. It seems fair to take advantage of her as a "friend."

Professor Tear said she has her eye on this girl. I can pawn her off on the professor and get them both off my back.

I put out some feelers.

"Have you chosen a research or training course?"

“Yes. I haven’t signed up yet, but there’s an Ancient Magic research lab, so I thought I’d—”

“Good! You join that research lab. As your friend, I’m peer-pressuring you to choose it.”

“That’s already my plan. But, wow. After hearing all that about me, I’m glad you still want to be friends.”

Her smile is so dazzling, it rivals Char’s.

But wait. Sounds like this was already going my way without me having to be her friend.

“Come to think of it,” I say, “you tell me you want to be friends, but haven’t you forgotten a pretty important step?”

Her white ponytail sways as she leans her head to one side.

“The self-introduction. You told me about your childhood, but I still don’t know your name. As you already know, I’m Haruto Zenfis.”

Strangely enough, a sudden look of hesitation washes over her.

“My name... Right, of course. In human society, people tell each other their names before they begin communicating. Yes, I do understand that.”

She seems flustered.

“My name...is the name I gave myself,” she begins. “It’s very dear to me. I wrote it so many times on the enrollment forms, and I’ve gotten used to being called by it. But...I’ve never actually presented myself to someone and spoken it aloud.”

There she goes again, sounding like a demon.

“But... All right. You are my friend. Allow me to introduce myself to you.”

She presses her hand to her ample chest and takes several deep breaths. She looks at me nervously, but earnestly, with her red eyes.

“My name is...”



Somewhere in the land of Pandemonium: The Garden of Gathering Demons (named by Char) is an open-air hot spring. Mixing the underground hot spring water with the river water, which also feeds the lake, creates the perfect temperature to bathe in.

Char is relaxing in the water when suddenly— “Ooh, my Haruto senses are tingling! Something exciting is happening to my brother!” she cries, leaping out of the bath.

Flay and Liza, who’ve just arrived, watch the little girl run off.

“That sixth sense for Sir Haruto—how do you suppose it works?” Flay ponders.

“I think it has to do with the defensive magic Sir Haruto has cast on her. It’s been active for days, and it still shows no sign of fading, no matter how far away he is. Combined with Lady Charlotte’s strong devotion to him, plus her latent magical powers, some sort of magic connection was established...is the theory I’m going with. Or rather, the theory I’m leaving it at.”

“Why do you seem a little grumpy...? In any case, ‘it’s a miracle of love,’ is what you’re saying,” Flay concludes with a twinge of envy. She washes the sweat and grime from her body and dips into the steaming bath.

“Whew... There’s nothing like a hot spring after a long day’s work.”

“But we still have more work to do. Why take a bath now when you know we’re going to get sweaty again?” Liza sighs as she dips in next to Flay.

“That’s how it should be. If we sweat again, we’ll bathe again. There’s nothing wrong with refreshing the mind and body over and over.”

I suppose so. Liza, eyeing Flay, witnesses living proof that fat does, in fact, float in water.

“Come to think of it, Liza, you’re a Blizzard Dragon. Are you okay taking a dip in a hot spring?”

“You’re the one who invited me, and you’re asking now? I may have a high tolerance for cold, but that doesn’t mean I have a low tolerance for heat.”

“Then why did you choose to live in such a cold and desolate place?”

“At the time, I loved solitude. All I wanted was to live a quiet life in a place where no humans or demons would intrude.”

But now, Liza is very much enjoying serving Haruto, caring for Char, and having friends.

She realizes that she was hiding away all those years because she was afraid of connecting with others.

“Were you on bad terms with the Demon King, too?” asks Flay.

“Not in particular. I just kept my distance because our ways of thinking were so different. Now...I can understand the Demon King and his desire to create a paradise for demons.”

The enclave Haruto is building on the lake is truly that. No, Haruto’s vision goes far beyond—he’s trying to build a paradise where humans and demons can co-exist, according to Char.

Of course, Haruto himself has no such intention.

His objective is only to establish a place where he can live comfortably as a shut-in. He doesn't care what goes on outside. The truth is, he's simply humoring his little sister's wild whims. But Flay and Liza have no idea.

Liza looks to Flay. "Do you really think Sir Haruto is the Demon King incarnate?"

"Yes. He may have lost his memory, but deep down, he hasn't changed. Even though his personality has changed a great deal. But that's all."

"Were you close to the Demon King, Flay?"

"We were sworn friends and allies. We shared the same ideals, although our methods to achieve them were different. As time passed, we began to butt heads, and eventually we went our separate ways. That is, only for a brief while. When the Flash Princess and her loathsome lot invaded, I tried once more to offer my support. But then..."

The Demon King had taken the fall for all of them, making sure every demon escaped to safety.

"Looking back on it now, perhaps that was the Demon King's plan all along, to let the humans win."

"Why? Did he abandon his goal to build paradise?"

"No, that's not it. Although it's true, building paradise was no easy feat. But I suspect the Demon King realized that it would never be possible without changing the humans' attitudes towards demons and monsters, and thus decided to reincarnate as a human."

"You mean, to change human society from the inside?"

“Yes. But the idea of emerging from the womb of the Flash Princess herself—I never would have imagined.”

Of course, Haruto isn’t actually the reincarnation of the Demon King, and he isn’t thinking at all about reforming the way people think about demons. But again, Flay has no idea.

“Honestly,” Flay continues, “it feels like Sir Haruto and the late Demon King are two different people. Perhaps the reason he’s lost his memory was to do away with the naïveté that held him back from being completely stoic. But...” Flay smiles in reminiscence. “The Demon King often called us a shortened version of our species names. Even when we told him to quit it, he’d never listen.”

“You mean ‘Flay’?”

“Yes. So when Sir Haruto named me that, I was so happy. So much so that I almost called him by the Demon King’s name.”

“If Sir Haruto ever regains his memory of his past life as the Demon King, which name will you call him by?”

“That’s for Sir Haruto to decide. Although, I’ve been under the assumption that he discarded the old name along with his memory.”

“Is it all right to ask the Demon King’s name?”

“Sir Haruto approves of you. There’s no reason I shouldn’t share it. Mind you, it isn’t a name to speak lightly.”

Yes. Liza nods gravely.

“The Demon King’s name was...”

Flay whispers nostalgically.

“...Irisphilia.”



“Hmm. Irisphilia, huh? It’s kinda long. Can I call you Iris?”

Irisphilia, the girl with the white ponytail, looks stunned for a moment. Then, she lets out a sudden burst of laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she chuckles. “I just remembered that I often used to shorten the names of others.”

I thought you said you didn’t have friends. But whatever, I’m not going to get into that.

“They often told me to quit it. Now that I’m in the same position, I can understand why it doesn’t feel good.”

But her smile doesn’t fade.

“I don’t mind it, though. You can call me whatever you like.”

Anyway, she’s made her first friend now, and I’ve made my first friend, too.

But there’s no guarantee we’ll still be BFFs after I’m expelled...



Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dragon Maid (3)

The entrance ceremony is today.

But I'm staying at my hermitage. My copy's out dealing with all that school stuff.

I can't say I'm not worried, but he is me, after all. I'm sure he'll keep his head down to draw as little attention to himself as possible, and promptly retreat to his dorm room. I gave him the means to escape in case he runs into any trouble. He should be fine. I think.

Trouble... Hmm. Trouble, huh.

If all had gone well, a capable dragon maid would be there by now to handle any trouble, like bullying. But all hadn't quite gone well...

"You put this in for this variable, and then you plug that value into this equation."

"Oh, I see! Then, I go like this, and... I did it!"

"Yes, that's correct. You're so clever, Lady Charlotte."

"Tee-hee-hee ♪ It's because you're such a good teacher, Liza."

Liza and Char are sitting across from each other at a table doing some tricky math problems.

They're in the middle of a magic lesson, calculating magic forces or something.

It's completely over my head. Charlotte may be clever, but she's only eleven. Her assignments can't be *that* hard. And yet, I'm totally lost. What does that make me...?

No, wait, I'm better off this way. My objective is to be the school dunce. I should be glad that I won't stand a chance at the toughest, most elite school in the kingdom. Yup.

And I can't be happy enough that Char has such a good teacher.

"We're lucky to have you, Liza," I tell her.

"I'm glad you feel that way." Liza looks bashful as Char and I smile at her.

Then...

"Wait... Liza, weren't you going to attend the entrance ceremony today with Copy Haruto?"

It's a little late for that, Char. By now, the ceremony's probably over.

"..."

Liza glances at me, then quickly looks away.

"Huh? What is it? Brother Haruto? Liza?"

Char senses the awkward vibe and tilts her head.

Why is Liza here, you ask?

Were attendants not required to be at the ceremony?

To answer those questions, we'll need to recap what happened yesterday...

It was the day before the entrance ceremony. Operation Get Expelled ASAP had officially commenced.

My plan was to leave it all to my copy at the dorm while I kicked back.

This is the last time I'll be seeing this dorm room. I was sorting through a stash of documents handed to me at the dorm entrance and throwing out the ones that looked like junk.

Just when I was about to leave my copy behind and start heading home...

"Sir Haruto, a problem has arisen," Liza announces as soon as she enters the room.

She was reluctant to come at first, but she'd learned to embrace her task once we arrived, and was out exploring the campus by herself. *Did something happen?*

"A teacher stopped me near the main building and asked me to show my official ID. I was told that starting tomorrow, I won't be allowed on campus without it."

"ID? Didn't we receive those on the first day? Wait... *Official ID?*"

I grabbed my ID out of mystery space-time. Oh. It said, "temporary."

I fished around in the trash can and shuffled through the papers I'd just skimmed.

What's this? One of the forms was stuck to another, probably because the ink was still fresh.

I peeled it off.

Mm-hmm. After the entrance ceremony, I was supposed to swap out my temporary ID for the official one.

"As for the attendant's ID... Oh. Here's the application form. We have to submit it to apply for your official ID."

I was this close to missing it.

What a pain. But without Liza, my copy was going to be lonely at school.

I quickly filled in the application and headed for the office.

“You’re turning in your application now? Very well.” The young man in the office seemed peevish. But I made it in time. Phew.

“Oh, you’re from the count’s fief. That’s quite a distance. I expect it’ll take about a week to verify her identity.”

“Huh?”

“Well, the students’ identities are confirmed at the enrollment application and whatnot, you know? And you were recommended by the king. Not to mention you’re the count’s son. But as for your attendant—this application is the first time we’ve even learned her name.”

“Yeah, but my dad and I can both vouch for her identity.”

“The background-checking process of the attendants used to be a mere formality, but recently, they’ve been making it a bigger deal.”

Who’s been making it a bigger deal?

“Attendants tend to come from families for lesser-ranking nobility, or they’re students’ relatives who aren’t qualified to enroll in the academy. But this girl has no family name, so she must be a peasant, correct? Which makes it a more sensitive situation, as I’m sure you understand.”

That’s discrimination against peasants! I debated shouting it aloud, but I suspected it wouldn’t help my situation.

I didn’t know what the deal was, but if the school was tightening up their background checks for attendants, it was bad news for us. Hmph.

But eh, I was sure my dad will make it work. I wasn't too worried.

"Aw man, one week, huh?"

"It'll be during orientation week," the young man said. "You won't have classes yet. I'm sure you'll be fine alone."

I assure you I won't be. If I'd thrown a tantrum, would they have let her stay? Probably not.

"Sir Haruto..." Liza looked at me worriedly.

Oh well, it'll be fine.

The whole reason for bringing Liza along was to keep up appearances. I'll be fine alone. Technically, my copy will be.

"Don't look so worried. You get to take it easy for a week."

I gave Liza a pat on the shoulder and strutted out of the office.

"So, there you have it," I conclude.

"That's too bad then," Char says.

"Yep. Too bad."

"Hahaha!" Char and I share a laugh.

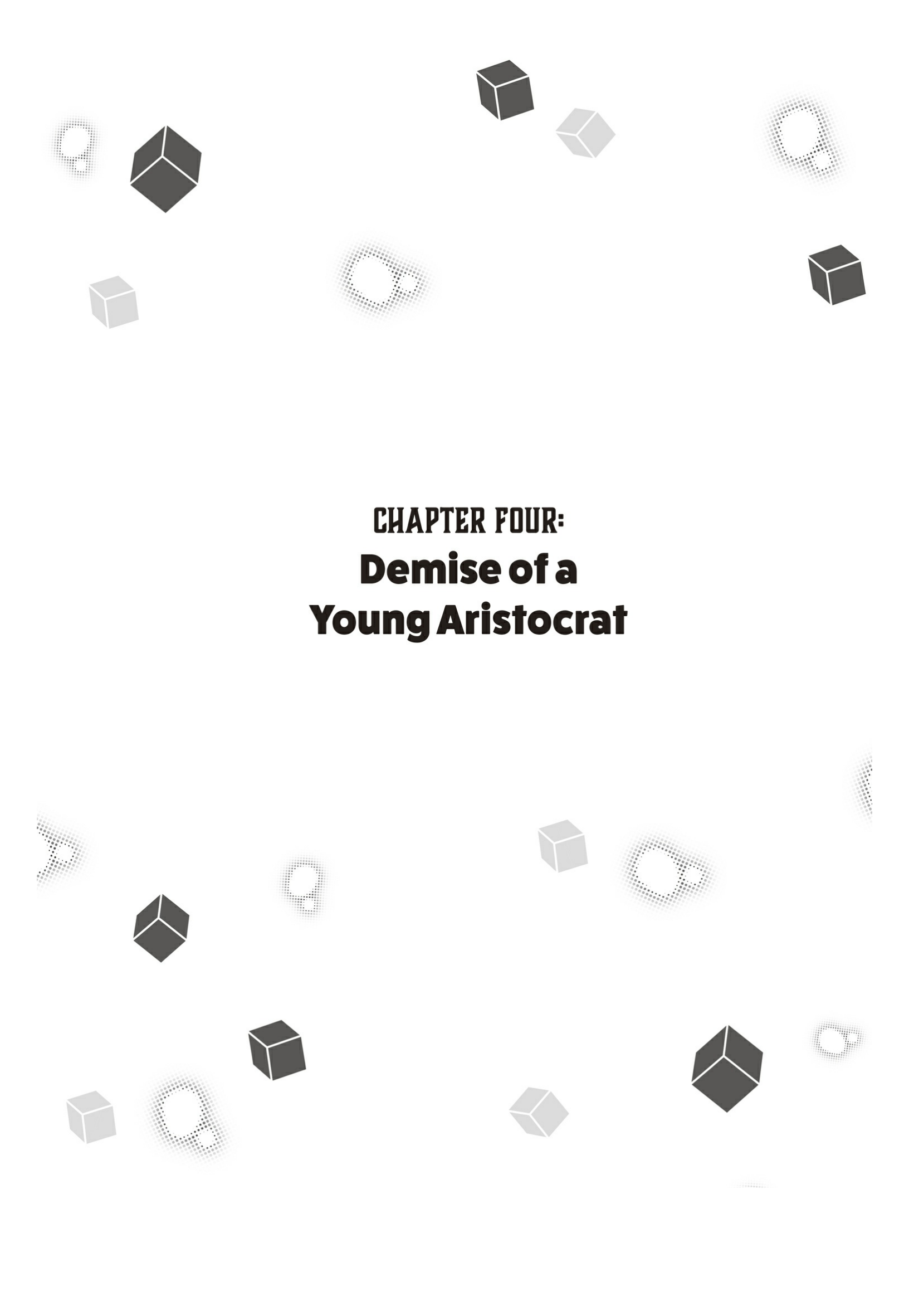
"Just when I was starting to look forward to going..." Liza says ruefully.

Sucks for Liza, but it's only for a week. *It'll go by like a breeze.*

Boy, was I naïve.

Who would've thought disaster would strike on day one (mostly thanks to Professor Kiddy Glasses)? But I rest my case: school is a terrible place.

Boo.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also several circles with a halftone pattern, some of which are partially cut off by the edges of the page. The shapes are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Demise of a Young Aristocrat

On my second day of school, I make a friend.

It's an unbelievable achievement for a former antisocial shut-in like me.

But I'm not happy about it. My goal is to get expelled as soon as possible. Making friends isn't on my agenda.

The pretty girl who's dressed like a boy finally introduces herself as Irisphilia as she stands before me with a big, satisfied smile. But we won't be friends for long. I'll be gone soon. Sorry 'bout that.

"Welp, seeya tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" She stops me as I turn to leave.

"Back to my dorm room. I'm, um... Oh, I still haven't selected my classes."

"In that case, I'll join you. I'm having trouble deciding, too. I bet if we put our heads together, we'll be more efficient in figuring out the best options."

She's got an answer to everything. In that case, I'll play the cool loner guy.

"Don't get too comfortable with me."

"Of course. I'm not trying to interfere with your choices. I came to this academy to fulfill my own mission. I have no intention of compromising my goals to fit in with yours."

How virtuous. I suppose everyone who attends an elite school like this one is here with a plan.

I could argue with her, but Irisphilia (AKA Iris) probably won't back down.

My classes will be decided by playing roll-the-pen, anyway. I'll just get it done

fast and kick her out.

“Okay. You want to come to my room?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

And so...

I brought it up super casually, but now that I think it over, inviting a girl to my room is a huge deal.

In my past life, no girl ever set foot in my room, except for my mom. In this world, only Char and the maids have been in my room. *Is this okay?* I wonder as I open the door.

“Welcome home, Brother Ha—rhlk?!”

What are you doing here?

As my little sister Char welcomes me with a huge smile, she notices Iris following behind me and chokes.

Char stands there frozen for a second, but quickly catches her breath. “A-Are you...”

Come to think of it, when they met on the street in the capital the other day, Char mentioned that there’s something “strange” about Iris.

Did she finally figure out what?

“...his girlfriend?!”

“We’re friends,” I correct her promptly.

“Well done, Brother Haruto. You’ve already made a wonderful friend. Oh, I am so very relieved.”

Char does look genuinely relieved. Was she that worried about me?

“Of course, I’ve always believed you could have five or ten girlfriends with no trouble, Brother Haruto. It seems the time for me to face the inevitable has finally come.”

Before I can figure out how to react to that, she looks up at me with her big doe eyes.

“If possible, could I at least be your number two wife?”

“Going straight for spot number two, huh? Does this country even allow bigamy?”

“Legally, no. But you’re Brother Haruto. You can have it your way!”

Uh huh, I have no idea what that means.

But... I see. Looks like Char still hasn’t grown out of her “I’m going to marry Brother Haruto someday” phase. But in a few years, she could move on to the “Ew, whatever, bro” phase... I hope that day never comes. I’d better do my best to be a good brother.

Iris steps in. “May I verify something? Is this a typical conversation between a brother and sister?”

“Probably,” I reply.

It’s a typical conversation between me and Char, at least.

“You’ve met her before,” I say to Char. “It turns out she’s a freshman here, too. I bumped into her again yesterday, and after some hodgepodge, today she coerced me into being her friend. This is Irisphilia. Iris, for short, since her name is long.”

“That’s your introduction for me...?” Iris then turns to Char. “You are my

friend's younger sister, so I don't mind if you call me by my shortened name."

"And this is my little sister Charlotte. You can call her Char."

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance. As per my brother's most cordial introduction, I am his younger sister, Charlotte Zenfis. I very much look forward to getting to know you."

She lifts the edges of her skirt and curtsies gracefully.

"Pleased to meet you, Char."

The two girls seem to be getting along without any friction. Not that I expected there'd be any.

"Char, I don't know what you're here for, but can it wait? We have work to get done."

Iris and I jump right into selecting our classes.

I open the booklet the school gave us, and start rolling my pen on a page listing the electives.

"Haruto, I have a question. What is the magical significance of that act?"

"I'm picking my classes."

"Allow me to explain," Char offers. "It signifies, 'Anything Brother Haruto picks will be easy-peasy for him, so it doesn't matter what he selects.'"

"I don't understand at all. I'm sure you came to the academy with aspirations, Haruto. You should select your classes carefully in accordance with your objective."

"Brother Haruto's objective lies outside of school. In fact, the very assumption that someone as talented as Brother Haruto has anything to learn from anyone is misguided."

“I acknowledge that Haruto’s abilities are great. But we can all learn things, even from people with lesser abilities.”

“Brother Haruto’s abilities are beyond the boundaries of such common principles.”

“Really? That far beyond...?”

The two girls seem to be carrying on the conversation without me. Makes my life easier.

“I’m curious about this non-academic objective. Would you mind telling me what it is?”

“My sincerest apologies, but I’m afraid I cannot disclose that information. Not even to a friend of Brother Haruto’s.” Char shakes her head gravely.

Yup. I can’t exactly tell her, “To get expelled as soon as possible.” Char gets me. But when did she find out my plan, anyway?

I guess there’s no keeping secrets from this child prodigy. But if she’s already figured out what I’m thinking, that saves time.

“Char, will you pick out some suitable classes for me?”

“Yes! It would be a tremendous honor. I promise to live up to your expectations, Brother Haruto.”

She bows her head humbly. Her manners are getting more sophisticated. Char is always at home, busy with her rigorous schooling regimen, so it’s probably good for her to have breaks like this.

I flop down on my bed.

As Char and Iris passionately discuss the options, I start watching anime on the barriers I pasted over my eyeballs and ears.

Every now and then, I let out a creepy muffled laugh, but the two girls don't seem to notice.

I finish three episodes.

"Fngh!" I snort.

That wasn't in reaction to the anime. Someone's shaking my shoulder.

I switch off the show, and Char's adorable face comes into view.

"Mission accomplished, Brother Haruto!"

"Thanks. You're a big help."

Char grins "not at all" as she hands me the forms.

"Don't you want to look it over?" Iris asks.

"No need."

Honestly, I don't care what it says.

"I'm flattered that you trust me so much, Brother Haruto. You're making me blush."

Indeed, Char is going red in the face. Well, I mean, yeah. I do trust her.

"Well then, Brother Haruto, it's time I should be getting back. Good day, Miss Iris."

"Okay. I still don't know why you stopped by...but see you soon," I say.

"Be well, Char. But how did you get into the school—" Before Iris starts asking questions, I scoot behind her and cover her eyes with my hands.

I yell out, "Hocus pocus... Illusion!"

When Char vanishes through the Anywhere Door in the wall, I release my hands. (The door just looks like a part of the wall when it's not in use.)

"I thought I heard the sound of a door from the wall right there, and not by the entrance..." Iris wonders aloud.

"You won't get ahead in this world if you sweat the small stuff."

"I can't have that. I need to achieve great influence in this kingdom so that I can reform society's way of thinking."

Whoa. Sounds like a big dream. She's surprisingly ambitious.

"Anyway," Iris starts up, "I tend to get curious once something bothers me. Isn't your home on the outskirts of the kingdom? Yet your sister dropped by so casually, and she didn't seem to have a purpose for her visit. How is that?"

And she doesn't stop there.

"I also couldn't follow what she was saying. One moment she's singing your praises, the next she's alluding cryptically to some sort of a 'round table.' Also, something about an 'evil organization' and a 'paradise' and an 'underground student council.' She says I must become a 'knight' if I want to learn more. Apparently, I am a candidate for that role. But what is her role, and what on earth are you..."

"Like I said, don't sweat the small stuff."

"Urrh... It's unsettling."

She gives me a look of pure consternation, so I gently redirect the conversation.

"You've chosen your classes, right? Shouldn't you be going now?"

Iris shows no sign of leaving.

She responds, "You still haven't chosen your course, have you? While I'm here, we can decide together. If you have nothing particular in mind, you could

just pick the same one as me. Of course, not if you don't want to."

Come to think of it, she mentioned joining that shrimpy professor's research lab.

I really don't care which lab I enroll in, as long as it's not that one.

Not only do I resent all the persistent attempts to recruit me, but I hear that the other teachers hate her. There's a good chance her lab will get shut down even before I get myself expelled.

If anything, I should be warning my friend that the research lab she's trying to sign up for has a bleak future. But wait a minute...

If I join Professor Tear's lab, maybe the other teachers will think less of me. Maybe they'll try to expel her students in an attempt to get her lab defunded. Maybe, maybe?

Divine inspiration strikes me.

I put my hand on Iris's shoulder.

"I'm actually interested in Ancient Magic, too. I've already spoken with the professor in charge about joining."

"Really? In that case, could you recommend me? I'm afraid they might reject me because of my background and lack of skills. Not to mention I'm working part time to support myself. But there's only one research lab devoted to Ancient Magic, and that's the only place I wish to join."

I doubt you'll need any recommendation at all. They seem to always be recruiting.

Before I could tell her that, Iris takes my hand from her shoulder and clasps it tight.

As she looks deep into my eyes, she says, “Please. I’m begging you.”

She bows her head and presses her forehead to my palm. Her hand and forehead are warm.

“Sure, no problem.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for relying on you so much. I promise to repay your kindness one day.”

It wasn’t my intention at all, but apparently, she owes me one now.

“It’s getting late today. Let’s do it tomorrow.”

It really isn’t that late, but I coerce her.

Tomorrow, I’ll submit my paperwork for my classes and visit the research lab. Or rather, my copy will. Since we’re taking turns daily.

The sexy-babe figurine on my desk looks as though it’s glaring at me.



My name is Haruto C.

I arrive with Iris—a friend “I” made while I was a figurine—in front of a run-down building on the far end of campus.

I’d hoped never to set foot here again, but if I have to do it to complete my mission of getting expelled, I guess I have no choice.

We enter a cluttered room and tell Professor Tear that we want to join her research lab.

“I see... My painstaking sales pitches have finally moved you.”

“Isn’t that wonderful, Doctor Luseiannel!”

“Indeed, Polkos. Now the lab will survive at least until these students graduate. Don’t let them escape!”

“Personally, I’d prefer it to disappear for good...”

“What was that, Polkos?!”

“Yeek! Nothing, Doctor...”

Sorry, Mr. Sweaty. I’m sure you’ve got your own problems, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to suck it up for a while.

“Now that we’re settled, let’s have a welcome party. You’ve already chosen your classes, right? Then you have nothing to do for the rest of the orientation period.”

In that case, I’d like to go back to my dorm room, please.

I feel someone tapping my arm.

“Thank you again, Haruto. I never imagined I’d be welcomed like this.”

It’s not thanks to me, really. But there’s no need to tell her that.

The professor announces, “I’ll treat you to my very own homemade cuisine today. You there, Haruto! Stop making that face. You’ll be surprised—I’m an excellent cook. Especially when it comes to my original dishes!”

A self-professed excellent cook with original recipes. I’m getting nothing but a bad feeling about this.

“Polkos, would you make some tea? The tea leaves are... Oh, I’d left them in the lab...”

In the lab? Why there? I’m dubious, but Mr. Sweaty doesn’t seem bothered by

this detail as he leaves the room.

It looks like we'll be stuck here a while, but the clutter in this room makes it hard to relax. Surrendering, I move some of the books and knickknacks off the sofa to make room for a place to sit down.

"Aaiieeeeeeee!!" A shriek echoes through the building. It's Polkos.

"What was that?" Iris exclaims. "We'd better go see."

I couldn't care less, but Iris pulls me down the hallway and into the room at the end. To our surprise, we see...

"Hey...isn't that...Mr. Rich Kid?"

Schneidel, the older student who picked a fight with me and Iris, is lying on the floor with his eyes rolled back in his head and his hands tied behind his back. Polkos has fallen flat on his butt, dumbstruck by the scene.

Looks like we've got a murder case on our hands.

Who killed Mr. Rich Kid?!

The tiny professor walks in. "Polkos, whatever is the matter? Why did you screa—oh? Oh, that's right! I'd forgotten all about him."

So Professor Kiddy Glasses is the murderer. And she's confessing without the slightest remorse.

"Welp, now this research lab is doomed for sure," I sigh.

Even in this world, murder is a serious crime. And this isn't just any murder. The victim is the son of a marquess. No matter what the story leading up to it could be, I'm pretty sure Professor Tear will be executed.

"Wait a minute. You seem to be misunderstanding. He's passed out, that's all."

Oh.

“He showed up last night all of a sudden, and asked me to take a look at a strange spell that was cast on him. It’s a type of magic he’d never heard of before, so he suspected it might be Ancient Magic. We tried various approaches to examine it, but we hit a wall around daybreak. Or rather, he did. Not me, of course.”

Mr. Rich Kid sure picked the wrong person to ask for help.

“Hm. Well, since he’s here, I can give you a lecture on Ancient Magic. We’ll use him as our live specimen.”

Professor Tear approaches Schneidel. She seems to be enjoying this.

“Iris—I’ll call you Iris, since that’s what Haruto calls you—come over here and feel his right shoulder.”

Iris knows Schneidel’s shoulder is injured. She reaches out hesitantly.

“There’s...some sort of hard object stuck to him?”

“Can you see it?”

“No. I can’t see anything, although I can definitely ‘sense’ it. I get a fuzzy sense that something’s there. But I can’t make out its outline.”

“Still, it’s incredible that you can sense it. I can’t at all. Completely imperceptible to me. Based on how you touched it, I’m guessing the object is a cylinder about an inch thick. Or perhaps more of a disk shape, because it’s wider than it is long. And there’s another one on his backside.”

Professor Tear pulls a pen out of her pocket.

“Now, this is where it gets interesting. When I go like this...”

She brings the pen closer to the disk-shaped barrier and pokes the boy’s

shoulder with its tip. Schneidel's body jerks.

"My pen passes right through the invisible disk. I experimented quite a bit, and I gathered that anything other than living flesh can pass right through."

Of course. I (my original) designed them like that. Otherwise, they'd get in the way of his bandage and clothing.

"But what are they for? To answer that question, I did all sorts of experiments. I learned that any attempt to treat the wound, and any attempt by him to use magic, triggers the disks to squeeze together. Like a vice."

Gee, that sounds painful.

"Haruto, do you know what this is?"

"I don't know."

Best to just play stupid.

"Do you, Iris?"

Iris frowns and thinks for a moment. Slowly, she begins to verbalize her thoughts. "Could it be...creation magic? No, wait, it's a fixed area...with special conditions, and it's immobilized."

"I see it was no accident that you got the highest score on the written entrance exam. Yes. The existence of spells that could immobilize a fixed area is documented in Ancient Magic scripture. But this is on a scale impossible with modern magic."

And then, nonchalantly as ever, she proclaims something that floors us.

"In other words, these are barriers."

“What?!” Iris is the one to blurt out a cry of surprise, but I’m just as shocked. She’s already onto my original’s magic. What’ll this mean for him?

“Haruto.” The professor looks at me. “What’s the main difference between Ancient Magic and modern magic?”

“It’s magic from a long time ago.”

She sighs, not even bothering to hide her disappointment, and casts a glance at Iris.

“It’s magic unbound by elements—so-called non-elemental magic,” the star student answers.

“Very good.”

I knew that, too. It is, after all, the field I’ve led my parents to believe I’m studying. I just chose not to answer her seriously because I’m trying to get expelled. I’m being stupid on purpose, I swear.

Professor Tear lectures, “Barrier magic by itself is non-elemental. The mainstream theory is that Barrier magic is a failed anomaly in modern magic. But based on the latest research—my research—it’s more natural to look at Barrier magic as a derivative of Ancient Magic.”

“But wouldn’t your theory suggest that a type of magic which once flourished in ancient times has been reduced to a very basic form of supplementary magic in the modern day?” Iris asks.

“A derivative, I said. Basically, today’s sorcerers are only capable of using Ancient Magic as a supplement.”

Whoa. Does that mean the Barrier magic I’m using is Ancient Magic? Me the

original, not me the copy.

Professor Tear carries on with her lesson. “What’s even more surprising is that at least a day and a half has passed since this magic was cast.”

“That’s absurd. Even Barrier magic consumes mana to be maintained. Without the spellcaster in close proximity, it shouldn’t last half a day,” protests Iris.

“We can’t expect Ancient Magic to follow the same rules as modern magic. There are several scriptures that hint at the existence of magic that can be sustained without continually consuming mana—I’ll show them to you later. Of course, only I could have figured this out,” Professor Tear proclaims smugly. “In any case, this is the realm of legendary mages in mythical times. Even the great sage Granfelt pales in comparison. The only one who may have come close in modern times was...the Demon King, who was said to have a mana level of over 80. That’s only if he knew Ancient Magic, of course.”

“...”

“But unfortunately, the Demon King is no longer with us. I detest the Flash Princess, but I’m impressed that she managed to defeat him. If the Demon King had wished to, he could’ve easily reduced the capital to ashes.”

Iris mutters, “There’s a limit to an individual’s powers... But as a herd, humans are highly capable. That’s why the Demon King lost.”

“That’s one theory. But based on the stories I’ve gathered, I suspect they either caught the Demon King in an extremely vulnerable moment, or he intended to let them win from the very start.”

“...”

“Whoops. I forgot that we are in the presence of the son of one of the

warriors who defeated the Demon King.”

Huh? Oh. She means me. But my dad was in a diversionary troop, so he didn’t come face-to-face with the Demon King.

But based on what she’s saying now, it seems unlikely that I’m using Ancient Magic.

You’d need to have a crazy high mana level, right? I’m just a measly worm with a mana level of 2. I even measured it with a three-digit Mija’s Crystal, so there’s definitely no mistake there.

Still, her lecture is interesting.

My Barrier magic does seem close to Ancient Magic. By studying Ancient Magic, I might discover all kinds of new ways to apply it.

If Professor Tear’s lab gets shut down, maybe we should make room for her back at my dad’s castle.

I bookmark the idea in my mind so my original can think it over later.

“We’ve gotten off track. The point is, there is an extremely high chance that the spell cast on the Hafen heir is Ancient Magic. Which leads us to a fascinating question. Who on earth cast this spell?”

Professor Tear shoots Iris a suggestive look.

“It wasn’t me. I can’t use such high-level magic.”

“Hmm. You don’t seem to be lying. But I managed to glean from his muttering that you were present at the scene when the spell was cast. Perhaps you have an idea of who it is?”

“I...cannot say. He made me promise not to...” Iris stammers.

You pretty much admitted to knowing who it is. Professor Tear looks thrilled.

“Did ‘he,’ now? Very interesting. I can see that you are a woman of your word, so I will not press you further. In that case, the only course of action is to continue asking the only other person who must know.”

Looking genuinely pleased, the professor twirls the pen in her hand.

Splick!

She stabs the pen into Schneidel’s shoulder.

“Aaaauuuuuughhhhh!”

“Doctor, what are youuuu—” Polkos squeals.

I shouldn’t be talking, but isn’t she being a bit too savage to the marquess’s heir?

“This lad refused to confess the culprit’s identity last night. But my patience is wearing thin. He should know; he’s the one who the spell was cast on. Stop resisting and spill it.”

That’s weird. I didn’t make Mr. Rich Kid promise to keep it a secret. Or did I? I don’t remember.

Back to the scene.

“He’s passed out again,” sweats Polkos.

After Schneidel let out his bloodcurdling scream, he’d foamed at the mouth and fallen unconscious.



Smak, smak! What a nice, firm slapping sound.

“Come on, you wimp. Wake up!”

It’s the sound of Professor Tear striking Schneidel in the face. Maybe from now on I should call her Professor Savage Glasses.

“Doctor Luseiannel, please stop! He’s the son of Marquess Hafen!”

“I am well aware of that, Polkos. Oh, he’s waking up.”

Schneidel’s eyes pop open.

“You cur! How dare you treat me with such— Ergh! You’re Haruto Zenfis! And you’re that girl!”

“Yo, senpai,” I greet him semi-politely.

“What is the proper response in this situation? ‘Good day, sir’? No, that’s not right...” Iris mutters to herself.

Suddenly, I remember something important. I haven’t received any word from Schneidel about canceling the duel.

“By the way, Schneidel-senpai. About tonight, don’t we have—”

“Oh, ohh, ohhhh! That! As you can see, I’m not well at the moment. Better yet, forget about our engagement. Nothing ever happened between us. You hear me?”

Despite the position he’s in, both politically and physically, he still manages to be condescending. I’m rather impressed by his audacity.

Professor Tear tilts her head to the side. “Your engagement? Oh, you mean the duel.”

“H-H-H-How did you know about that?”

“Your messenger was announcing it loudly in front of the boys’ dorm. It’s

been the talk of the school since yesterday.”

Mr. Rich Kid turns blue.

“Anyway, thanks for canceling it, senpai,” I say.

“Yes,” Professor Tear affirms. “We are your witnesses. You proposed a duel, and then canceled it the day of. It’s evident you have no dignity as a member of the nobility.”

Rich Kid opens his mouth, but no words come out. His limp body seems to sink even further into the floor.

“Well, that takes care of that. Let’s return to the topic at hand,” Professor Tear says, pulling the pen out of his shoulder.

Schneidel howls, “Kyeowah!! You...you understand that I’m the next-in-line of the Hafen family, don’t you?”

“As I’ve said, I am fully aware of that. On the other hand, I’m surprised you came to *me* for help. I’m sure you were aware that the Luseiannel house supports the king. And while the Hafens don’t side with the king or the queen, your family is still in rivalry with ours.”

Professor Tear gestures towards me with her chin. “Moreover, this boy is the son of Count Zenfis, the king’s chief ally. You’re aware of that, too, I’m sure.”

“Can you please leave my dad out of this?”

“Oh, my apologies. You’re usually so aloof about everything, but this seems to be a line that mustn’t be crossed. I’ll remember that. In any case, I have no intention of taking advantage of the family rivalries. Personally, I’m not fond of the king, either. My point is that I don’t care who you are.”

Professor Tear grabs Schneidel by the collar, and deliberately slings her arm

over his injured shoulder.

“Unfortunately,” she whispers into his ear, “I cannot undo this spell. Which means the only person in the world who can help you is the one who cast it. Now, isn’t it about time you tell us who it was?”

“Urg... Uh...” Schneidel whimpers.

“I’m not asking you *why* you’re refusing to speak. But if you can just give me a name, I’ll do the negotiating. I’m not doing this to satisfy my own curiosity. I genuinely want to relieve you of your suffering as soon as possible. Believe me.”

That’s a lie. No doubt.

Schneidel’s brow wrinkles, and beads of oily sweat drip down his face.

“I don’t...know...” he mutters. “He wore black from head to toe, and he spoke in a strange voice. That’s all I’ve got...”

“Hmm, I see. So you were ashamed to admit that you were bested by some nameless ruffian,” the professor concludes.

Schneidel grinds his teeth.

“You’re letting your pride get the better of you. Or are you in genuine fear that talking about him will put your life in danger? In any case, you ought to set your ego aside and seek out any information about him that you can find.”

Maybe someone ought to stop her from rubbing salt in his wounds.

“But this is interesting.” The professor looks up. “From that scant information, I can think of someone who matches the description.”

““What?!”” Iris and Schneidel shout in unison.

I notice Professor Tear grinning in my direction, so I have an idea of what she’s getting at.

“Haruto, I hear that an unknown ‘ally of justice’ has been appearing in the count’s region these past few years. He fits the description that Schneidel gave us. Have you made his acquaintance?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Who is he?”

“I really don’t know.”

“How can we contact him?”

“I don’t know.”

I try to sound as nonchalant as possible, but I’m not good at keeping a poker face. That’s my original’s proficiency. Besides the fact that I can’t use magic, I think there might be some minute differences in our personalities, too.

“For years, he was only seen in the count’s fief, but recently, he appeared in the royal capital. Around the same time you arrived here, Haruto. What an odd coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

Uh-oh. Her target has totally shifted from Schneidel to me.

“Is it? Maybe he happened to have some business here.”

“Business, huh? Very interesting. Indeed, things have been murky in the capital of late. Perhaps a better question to begin with is why you were sent to attend school here in the first place.”

“The king recommended me. I don’t know why.”

“Right. The king personally recommended you. It’s only natural to assume he must’ve had some objective in mind.”

“Maybe. But I have no idea what.”

“And, in fact, your magical talent is so immeasurable that it destroyed Mija’s Crystal. Hmm? Wait a minute... In that case...?”

This is bad. If she continues to press me, I might end up confessing something I shouldn’t. After all, I’m just a magic-less little peon.

At least I’m shielded by a protective barrier. In theory, I can withstand torture.

But if she imprisons me for a long enough period, I might crack. My desire to loaf around in my room always wins.

“Perhaps you are the man in black? No, you *must* be!” exclaims the little professor.

Oh no, now what? Save me, real Haruto!

“Your summons has reached me! It is I, the harbinger of justice, Shiva!”

A stylish guy dressed in all-black appears out of nowhere. *Huh? Why? What’s my original doing here?*

Oh, I see what’s going on. He’s been spying on me because he’s worried that I might screw up when I’m crammed between these two nutjobs: Professor Kiddy Glasses and Socially Awk Girl.

I get it. I totally get it. He’s me, after all.

There’s that old saying: the person you can trust the least in this world is yourself.



I (Original Haruto) have been secretly watching my copy.

I was worried that he might be getting into some mess with the overbearing Professor Kiddy Glasses and Socially Awk Girl. My worries were right on the mark.

I've been spying on them, hiding behind an optical camouflage barrier. The entire time, I was sweating that Iris, with her sharp intuition, might notice. But I lurked in the shadows, putting my hide-and-seek skills to the test.

There's a reason why I'm here in Shiva Mode.

The idea is to dispel any notions of "Haruto = Shiva" by being in the same room as my copy.

"That boy there and I have no relationship whatsoever," I declare. "I'm just in town to defeat the forces of evil that plague the capital. I have no connection to that boy. This is important. Hence, I said it twice."

"Oh, ooh!" squeals the professor. "So you're the Ancient Magic practitioner. That physique—both svelte and muscled. Your sleek helmet, how chic. I must say, you look so cool!"

Is she even listening?

"But I digress." The kiddy professor tones it down a bit. "Evil, you say? So, you must know that the Hafen boy here is a member of a certain shady organization."

How should I know? Don't tell me there really are some kind of underground student council shenanigans going on. Not that I care.

"It's best you don't probe," I warn. "Today, I've merely come to check

whether this young noble has learned his lesson. Nothing more.”

Dealing with Professor Tear is a chore. I just want to take care of business and peace out.

I continue. “Schneidel. I commend you for calling off the duel, in accordance with my instructions. Just in case, I’ll leave the vice blocks on for one more night. You shall be released from them tomorrow morning.”

“Why, you—”

“No? If you’re confident you can remove them yourself, I’ll leave you to it.”

Hrrgg! Mr. Rich Kid fumes, but doesn’t say anything.

But honestly, he can probably break the spell himself, now that he knows they’re barriers. I’m surprised Professor Tear said she couldn’t do it. Busting up barriers is super easy. I’ve done it lots of times.

I’ll have to keep an eye on him for a bit longer. Even though it’s another chore.

Anyway, my business here is done. Time to go...or so I thought.

“Leaving so soon?” Professor Tear licks her lips, eyeing me like a Hell Hound stalking its prey. “Stay a while. Since you’ve arrived, two hundred and seventy-one questions have occurred to me, and I cannot allow you to leave before I get an answer to every single one.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” I say, realizing that I can’t move.

Moving only my eyes, I look down and see rings of light around my chest, hips, wrists, and upper arms. I can feel them on my thighs, ankles, head, and neck, too.

“You let your guard down. Too bad. You were so busy chatting with the Hafen

boy that you didn't even notice."

The professor narrows her eyes and puffs out her chest proudly, even though it's flat as a washboard.

"My binding magic is a special breed. I'll bet even the Flash Princess wouldn't be able to escape, if I can manage to cast it on her. You may wield Ancient Magic, but not even you—"

Clang!

"Hyaw?!"

Clang. Clang. Clang-clang-clang-clang!

I break them carefully, one by one.

After her funny squeak, Professor Tear can only stare with her eyes wide, jaw to the floor.

"A blend of Earth and Darkness, I see. You're right, it's tougher than if they were made from Earth magic alone."

But I've done plenty of research about this kind of magic.

The rings of light are made with high-powered force fields, fundamentally the same stuff as a standard defensive barrier wall.

When I fought the Flash Princess, she was able to block all of my attacks effortlessly. So I investigated how she was able to break them, and I found a way. The trick is to strike them with destructive barriers, without resisting the force fields.

I don't know if these will work against the Flash Princess, though.

And this little shrimp is surprisingly powerful, too. Her mana level is 33, which is pretty high, but more importantly, she has affinities to all four elements, plus

a special Darkness affinity—she’s a super-quad-elemental!

Anyway, I did notice that she was up to something. But I thought it might be Ancient Magic, so I let it slide. I wanted to see what she’d do. It was all calculated, I swear. You believe me, right?

But if she’s using elements, that means it’s ordinary magic. I’m a little disappointed.

She just said, “I’ll bet even the Flash Princess wouldn’t be able to escape,” but she’s gotta be kidding. Maybe she’s been focusing too much on research and not enough on practical magic skills. Yeah—that must be it.

The speechless professor finally comes to her senses.

“How did you do that?! And what have you done to me? I can’t move a muscle!”

While she was busy being dumbfounded by my escape act, I restrained her with my own binding barrier. I’ve been perfecting the art of sneak attacks since I was born in this new incarnation. Experience speaks loudest.

Polkos turns pale. “Isn’t it obvious? You got cocky, and now you’ve angered him, Doctor! Hurry up and apologize!”

“This is amazing, Polkos! Gridlocked to perfection. From the neck down, it’s as if I’m embedded in stone—I can’t move a muscle. It’s hard to even breathe.”

“Yes, yes! But you need to apologize! You’re unquestionably at fault here.”



“Right, I am sorry. I let my curiosity get the better of me and I behaved rashly. I’ve learned my lesson. Really!”

Hard to believe.

“Speaking of which, I’m still waiting for an answer to my question from earlier. And while you’re at it, I’d like you to answer my other questions, which are now up to eight hundred and twenty-four.”

“Doctor! You’re still being rude! Do you really want to die that badly?”

“Hmm. I suppose it’s not worth dying over. On the other hand, I have no money for a bribe. My research funds are negligible. And my family has pretty much disowned me, so I can’t mooch off them... I know!” Professor Tear’s eyes light up. “How about I offer you my virginity? I can’t disclose how many years I’ve been guarding it, but I can guarantee that it would be a delicious treat!”

“Ack, you stupid child! That’s enough!”

Polkos stomps his foot without so much as wiping his dripping sweat. Why is he babysitting this buffoon, anyway? He seems to be some sort of assistant—is she blackmailing him?

“Oh!” the professor yelps.

What now?

“I...I need to go pee.”

Polkos drops to his hands and knees now, completely exasperated.

“This binding magic of yours? It’s too tight in a lot of places!”

“You’re never to stick your nose in my business again,” I demand.

“Is this really a good time to bargain? Quite the negotiator, aren’t you?”

“Do you understand?”

“Okay, fine. I understand, I’m sorry. I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of my new students. Now that I’m aware of it, I realize I’m pretty close to the edge.”

“Really? You promise you won’t ever snoop around on me?”

“Y-Yes, yes. I won’t. But for real. I’m not kidding. This is bad...”

At this point, she’s sweating as profusely as Polkos.

“Really and truly?”

“R-R-Realrwy... Reawwyyyy...”

Losing all her cool, her face contorts into a pained grimace.

Making girls pee themselves isn’t my thing, so I decide to let her go.

I undo the barrier. Professor Tear bolts out of the room like a bullet.

“I give up for today! But let’s have a nice long talk next tiiiiiiiiime...” she shouts over her shoulder as she zips to the bathroom.

“I’ll be going now, too. Farewell!” I spring out the window, but in discontent. Doesn’t feel like a job well done.



Shiva (Original Haruto) is gone.

And I, Haruto C, am left behind.

Schneidel also left at some point, and before I know it, the so-called welcome party has begun.

Professor Tear and Iris seem to be hitting it off. They're having a heated conversation about Ancient Magic.

As for me?

"I used to be a private tutor at Count Luseiannel's residence. I taught the doctor when she was little..."

I'm stuck listening to Polkos's reminiscences. He seems to have a habit of being self-deprecating in front of his students.

"She was a true child prodigy. Not only does she have the talent for magic, but her intellect is what one might consider a national treasure. Teach her one step, and she'd already be ahead by another ten, and from there, she'd conceive a hundred ideas. Over time, listening to her theories became my only role, as it still is today."

With a glass of wine in one hand, Polkos babbles, "As the third son of a broke viscount, I had to struggle immensely to land a teaching position at this academy. But Doctor Luseiannel was able to skip grades and enroll at a young age. In less than five years, she graduated valedictorian. Two years later, she had her own lab. It all happened in the blink of an eye."

I could probably guess the mini-Professor's age with this much information, but frankly, I don't care.

"But I still don't get it... Why Ancient Magic? She's plenty talented to develop new magical techniques if she were to pursue modern magic. Doctor Luseiannel is the closest person to attaining the title of 'sage.' Why would someone like her choose..." He trails off.

Hmm. Her cooking is surprisingly decent. The presentation looks good, too. She wasn't lying about being a good chef.

“Anyway, you know how she is. With that personality...” he laments. “I try to be understanding. But who knows what goes on in the mind of a genius.”

I decide not to indulge in the booze. I was never a drinker in my past life, and I’m still a minor in this one, by modern-day Japan’s standards. I don’t even know if alcohol would affect me, a copy.

“Speaking of personality, she’s never been good with people,” Polkos rambles on. “She clashed with her family. Now they don’t even talk to her. I’m sure her parents are worried, though. They’re the ones who asked me to keep an eye on her as an assistant. Although the academy saddles me with their chores as well. I can’t always attend to her...”

Uh-oh. Iris’s face is bright red. The little professor is getting her drunk. Is it legal to drink at fifteen in this country?

“Um, are you listening?”

“Yes, I’m listening.”

I wasn’t listening.

“In any case, Doctor Luseiannel is a leading figure not just in Ancient Magic, but in all fields of magic internationally. You can trust her on that,” Polkos declares.

Is he trying to warn me that I shouldn’t trust her when it comes to other things?

“Please, give her a chance... Her personality can be a bit, you know, but...zzZ”

Still holding his wine glass, Polkos dozes off.

Didn’t I hear him say he’d be glad if the lab disappeared? I guess people are complicated.

I slip the wine glass out of his hand (trying not to get his sweat on me) and set it on the table. Then I gorge myself on the food. I don't require nourishment, and anything I swallow just gets sucked into mystery space-time, but I can still enjoy the flavors. Thanks, real Haruto.

"Hey! Harr-to-o-o!"

Who, me?

Iris wobbles towards me. She's drunk as a skunk.

"Hwa?" She stumbles. I'm not quick enough to get out of the way, so I end up having to catch her. Her skin is soft. And she reeks of alcohol.

Iris leans her head on my shoulder and sighs. *Hwaaah!*

"This issa wonnerful research cenner! This might be the place... I think...I can... get stronger...zzZ"

She's fallen asleep, too.

I carry her to the sofa and lay her down.

"Do you know why she's interested in Ancient Magic?" a voice drawls from behind.

I turn to see Professor Tear. Her cheeks have a pink glow, and she holds a bottle of booze in one hand.

"I have no idea."

"Aren't the two of you friends?"

Then she goes into a monologue, too. Even though nobody asked for one.

"The girl has a max mana level of 35. Not as high as Laius, but still quite impressive. And get this: Iris possesses an affinity to not just all four of the basic

elements, but also to Light, Darkness, and even Chaos. She's an EX Rank! Like a protagonist in an adventure story who rises from peasantry to hero."

I knew about her abilities already. My original measured her the day they met.

"But her current mana level is a 5, right?"

"That's right. Her mana level stopped at a number that most students here would've surpassed by the age of ten. That's why her practical skills score was so terrible."

"I'm surprised she was accepted."

"Iris is still in her teens. It's too early to determine whether her mana level has really 'closed.' And she got the highest score on the written test. The academy accepted her with a barely-passing grade, with the expectation that she'll grow in the future."

When your mana level becomes stagnant before reaching its max, they say your level "closed." The king of this country is rumored to be just that.

"But what does that have to do with Ancient Magic?"

"She's gambling on the potential it holds. A method to 'open' a person whose level closed hasn't been discovered—at least, not with modern magic. But during the mythical ages when Ancient Magic prevailed, they say that mages with a mana level of over 100 were common. With that kind of power, forcing open your mana level doesn't seem so impossible. Iris has her hopes set on that possibility."

"Is there a possibility?"

"That I cannot tell you. I've yet to explore such a theory."

“She was mumbling something about thinking she could become stronger here.”

“She’s holding a little too fast to that chance. If I ever did find a way to ‘open’ one’s mana level, I’d be awarded a medal. Why, the king would be indebted to me. Heh—I like the sound of that. The research funds would flood in!”

“But there’s also a chance that if her level doesn’t increase, she’ll get kicked out of school, isn’t there?”

“That is the overwhelmingly more likely scenario.”

Glug glug glug! Professor Tear chugs the rest of the bottle and lets out a deep sigh. *Aaaah!*

“Clinging to the slimmest thread of hope may sometimes be laughed off as ‘escapism’ by other people. But the will to fight for hope that undeniably exists—I find that to be something beautiful.”

She looks over to Iris on the sofa and gazes at her tenderly.

“I must be drunk. I’m usually not the sentimental type. Time for me to sleep, too. Good night.”

Just as I’m wondering if she’s embarrassed about opening up, Professor Tear sprawls out on the floor like a starfish, and begins to snore. The corner where she and Iris were talking is littered with bottles.

I guess I can go now since they’re all fast asleep. I want to sleep in my own comfy bed.

But instead of heading for the door, I find myself moving towards the window. I open it and look up at the night sky. The moon is out, and it’s beautiful.

“What an odd bunch.”

A girl who aspires to become stronger for some reason, but is already hitting a wall.

A young genius professor who walks her own path, even though it alienates her from her peers.

A man who's come to terms with his mediocrity and unshakeable ties with said genius, and devotes himself to her.

They're all different breeds, and they're all misfits.

“So am I, more or less,” I say to myself.

Maybe that's why.

“I feel like...this isn't so bad. How about you?” I glance to the side.

A man suited in black hovers in the air, leaning against the building.

“You're me. I do feel the same...”

My original moves away from the wall.

“It's way past curfew. If you head back now, you'll get in trouble with the dorm's security guard. If you wait until tomorrow, Professor Tear can probably cover for you. What'll it be?” he asks.

“You'd know, wouldn't you?” I reply.

“All right. I'll take the bed then. I'll come back tomorrow morning to switch places. Don't go wandering around outside until then, okay?”

He snaps his fingers and flies off.

“Same as me, huh?”

My personality might be ever-so-slightly different from my original's. After all,

I didn't experience his previous life firsthand. I only have records of it—in a way, it feels like something that happened to someone else.

I scoop up a spoonful of the giant pudding on the table.

When I bring it into my mouth, my tastebuds flood with sweetness. I don't usually like sweet things, but this is...

"Yeah. Not bad."

Too bad he didn't stay to have some. It's way better to experience it for yourself, not just know about it through a recording.

In any case, until our mission is complete, this research lab will be my base during the day.

With a bunch of other misfits, just like me.

"Not bad, I guess."

I'm kind of starting to look forward to this...



Schneidel retreats to his estate in the inner city.

Tearietta and the man in black, who called himself Shiva, both left after they had their skirmish. Polkos was the one to untie him. Schneidel ran out, and he's been hysterical ever since.

He storms to his room, ignoring his maids' greetings.

"Dammit! Dammit! Damn it all!!"

He hurls his expensive belongings about, and within moments, the room looks

like a hurricane's aftermath. But his anger shows no sign of subsiding.

The past three days have been full of insults and humiliation—things that the young aristocrat never imagined he'd experience, and was never supposed to experience in his life.

His right shoulder throbs.

"Tomorrow..."

He drops to his knees, shaking with fury.

Tomorrow morning, the mysterious vice spell will be lifted. There's no guarantee that the man who cast it will keep his word, but right now, to Schneidel, that's the least of his concerns.

He challenged a boy to a duel and rescinded it at the last minute.

The news is sure to spread throughout the academy. Discrediting a professor of some piddling little research lab would be easy. But Haruto Zenfis is a different case.

Haruto is the king's hand-picked freshman, and the son of Count Zenfis. Status-wise, their families are almost on equal footing.

The truth of the event boils down to his word against Haruto's, but the fact that everyone already knows how Schneidel was injured puts him at a disadvantage in that regard.

He was already disgraced by the new kid. By withdrawing the challenge, Schneidel's honor will be further besmirched.

"This cannot happen. It simply must not!"

The Hafen family is plotting to overthrow the current ruler and drive out the queen. Their ultimate vision is to build a new nation, all of which is to be

accomplished while his father is the head of the household. Schneidel will become the future king.

That's why Schneidel's taking part in the shady religious group. It's a highly capable organization, managing as they have to extract funds from the queen. Using them to his advantage, the plan had been progressing smoothly, but now...

Slowly, Schneidel raises his head.

His gaze falls upon a metal box the size of a pencil case. It must have fallen from the shelf that he knocked over. A gift from said religious group.

He reaches his left hand for it, but stops.

As the king-to-be, relying on some shady cult is out of the question.

"I mustn't falter now!"

A smudge on the Hafen name must be cleansed with the Hafen family's own power.

He's cornered. He can't afford to pick and choose his method. It makes his blood boil to admit that the cheeky professor was right, but he's at a point where there's no going back.

"I'll start with the four of them."

If there are no witnesses, there will be no one to speak of his disgrace. The man in black can say what he wants—nobody even knows who he is. And if he shows up to question the whereabouts of the other four—Schneidel will deal with him then.

"Hah... Muahaha! Hahahahaha!"

Schneidel immediately puts his plan into action.

Leaving his trashed room behind, he heads for the study.

It's actually his father's room for when he stays in the capital. Schneidel isn't permitted to enter, but who cares? He leans back in the desk chair and continues to explain his ploy.

Two men, summoned by the young heir, are listening.

One is a young man dressed like a gardener. The other is a middle-aged man in ragged clothing who appears to be a menial underservant.

The middle-aged man—thin and rugged—closes his eyes while he listens to Schneidel's instructions.

"And that is your assignment. Do you understand, Wayze?"

The middle-aged man, Wayze, slowly opens his eyes. He has the withering gaze of a wild predator.

He says, "May I ask a question, Junior?"

"I've told you to quit calling me Junior!"

"Pardon me, Master Schneidel. Now, may I ask a question?"

"Very well. What is it?"

The younger servant watches out of the corners of his eyes as Wayze continues softly.

"Do you know what kind of target we're trained to hunt?" he asks with a tint of hostility in his voice.

Ulp! The younger servant swallows.

The two are members of the Hafen family's special assassination force, a

platoon of elite soldiers assembled to support Marquess Hafen in usurping the throne. Their end goal is to defeat Queen Gizelotte, the Flash Princess, as well as to bring down the king.

“Are you mocking me?!”

Bam! Schneidel punches the desk with his left hand. The impact travels to his right shoulder, and he grimaces in pain.

Schneidel continues, his breath ragged, “I am *very* well aware of that. Your expertise in undercover operations is precisely why I’m commanding you. My family’s honor is at stake. It’s crucial that the four be eliminated in secret. Tearietta Luseiannel and the other members of her research lab. All of them!”

“I’m glad to know that you are aware. I will not ask why you need them killed, as I understand it is a matter of your personal honor, Master Schneidel. However—”

Wayze’s nonchalant tone turns to one of unveiled spite. “Infiltrating the Royal Academy is no easy task. Even more so if we’re to leave no trace. I will mobilize all soldiers within the capital for this mission. Is that understood?”

“Wait. You’ll stand out if you operate in numbers. I don’t see why you need the entire force just to get rid of four people.”

“If we can utilize this assignment as a practice run for when we bring down that she-fox, it’ll be worth our while.”

The corners of Wayze’s mouth turn up, but his eyes are humorless. Silent rage seeps from his expression, as if to say, *If we can’t at least call it a “practice,” we won’t stand to partake in such nonsense.*

“Very well. So long as you get results. Do as you please.”

“Thank you, *Junior.*”

“Why, you—”

“Let’s go,” Wayze tells his young comrade.

“Yessir. Master Schneidel, we’ll report our success to you soon.”

The younger man follows Wayze out of the room.

The two men march through the dark corridor.

“Commander Wayze, what do you think this mission is about?”

“Who knows. He probably lost a duel or something.”

“Now that you mention it, there’s a rumor going around the estate that Master Schneidel challenged Count Zenfis’s son to a duel. And our master was nursing his right shoulder rather strangely. I wonder if that has anything to do with...”

“Save the idle speculation for later. Assemble all forces to Point C in the eastern district of the capital.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Listen. This may be a practice mission, but nobody can know about our existence. We’re taking this seriously.”

If they leave the slightest trace, Queen Gizelotte is bound to detect it. They will need to be vigilant, even if the target is just some research staff and their students.

“Yessir!” The young man runs down the corridor.

As Wayze watches him go, a sneer spreads across his face.

“Hmph. A jaunt like this is a small price to pay if it puts Junior in our debt.”

In the future, Marquess Hafen will defeat the queen, bring the king to his knees, and seize control of the kingdom.

They've already discreetly eliminated several political rivals.

Being a top-secret task force, they're ordered to camouflage themselves as lowly house servants by wearing ragged, dirty clothes.

If the force can prove to the marquess through this mission that they're ready to defeat the Flash Princess, the day they will be able to operate openly is nigh.

Success is imperative. They must execute the operation flawlessly.

"We'll need to be careful with Count Luseiannel's daughter."

She's the greatest prodigy the academy has seen since its establishment. The girl genius has been characterized as the closest thing to a sage today.

The Flash Princess is as brilliant a sorcerer as she is a warrior. By contrast, Tearietta Luseiannel is an intellectual—a researcher by profession. But given that her current mana level is over 30, there's no question that she will be a formidable opponent.

If they can break down her defenses with ease, it'll bode well for their battle against the Flash Princess, who prioritizes offense.

Wayze formulates several potential scenarios in his mind.

Will the targets be all together or separate? Where will they be? What will the environment be like? He makes a detailed mental survey of all the key locations and inhabitants of the capital, down to every child of the nobility.

Then he narrows the possibilities to a dozen or so likely plans, and evaluates them thoroughly. But as he's doing so, he fails to detect...

...the transparent, rectangular tablet floating above his head...



Deep within the grounds of the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic, in front of an old, run-down building...

Several shadowy figures are scattered in the darkness.

Ten of them meet up near the front entrance.

“What’s the status?” Commander Wayze demands.

The men are all clad in black robes with hoods that shroud their eyes.

“The four targets are the only ones in the building,” one of the men reports. “They’re all in a meeting room located in the center of the second floor. It appears they were having a party. Three of the targets are passed out drunk. The remaining target, Haruto Zenfis, has just fallen asleep on the sofa.”

“Good. Has the area been fully secured?”

“Yes. Five men from the ops squad have finished setting up the triple-layered intruder-detecting soundproof radar barriers, each infused with a different element. With a bonus feature of lightning bolts that will strike anyone who attempts to pass through.”

Five other men are on standby, retaining their escape route out of the campus.

Between the ten soldiers in the ops squad and the ten soldiers in the assault squad, there are twenty men in the platoon.

The special assassination forces of the Hafen dynasty are each executing their roles to perfection.

All of the targets are in one place, with most of them passed out drunk. The best scenario imaginable.

But Wayze is ever vigilant. He proceeds through each step of the prescribed operations carefully.

“Good. We’ll go over the plan one last time.”

They will kill the four sleeping targets simultaneously and flee with the bodies. Next, they will erase any traces of blood and other evidence so that the targets will appear to have simply vanished.

Of course, if four people disappear at once, there’s bound to be a commotion.

Schneidel will be the obvious suspect, since his recent quarrel is known to all.

But Wayze has already thought about how to contend with that.

Days later, when the bodies begin to decay, the squad will dump them in a dangerous part of town. Alongside them, they’ll leave the bodies of some hoodlums.

Spread some rumors, like “The four were out drinking late at night” and “They were seen arguing with some hoodlums,” and the story will snowball on its own, even without actual witnesses. People will conclude that Professor Luseiannel and her cohorts snuck out of the academy late at night to go drinking, and got into trouble.

All they have to do is acquire a few random bodies and do a bit of fine-tuned evidence manipulation.

They’ve carried out similar jobs countless times. They have the knowhow.

Piece of cake.

“Commence the operation.”

At the commander’s signal, a team of four soldiers runs towards the south entrance of the building, near the room where Tearietta and the others are sleeping. Another team of four approaches the front entrance.

There’s no chatter among them. Every mission is conducted with the utmost vigilance and focus, no matter who the target is.

Although they do harbor some resentment.

The finest assassins of the Hafen family are being sent to clean up after a children’s squabble. The very same men who were stringently selected and trained to defeat the Flash Princess.

They’ll just have to vent their anger by brutalizing the four targets, which conveniently aligns with the plan to make it look like some street thugs got out of control.

With a sadistic grin smeared across his face, Wayze marches forward.

“Ow!”

“Wh-What is that?”

The soldiers stop short. They’re standing no more than ten feet from the front entrance.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s...some kind of invisible wall. We can’t go any further.” One soldier feels around the air with his palms.

Wayze cocks his head skeptically and extends his own hand. “You’re right. There’s something here.”

A hard, wall-like something. He bangs his fist on it like a door, but there's no sound.

The men split into two groups in search of an opening.

"There's no entry over here, either. We're blocked off."

"It seems to be completely surrounding the building."

They rendezvous with the team that was sent to enter the building from the window side.

Wayze leaps up high, landing on the roof of the two-story structure.

"It's walled off from the top, too."

The invisible wall encloses the top of the building as well. He can see the building's roof right through it. The other members of the group join him, and they all begin examining every inch of the transparent surface they're standing on.

After a thorough investigation, they still haven't found an opening.

"Couldn't even put a dent in this wall with a Mithril knife."

They decide to break the wall with magic, running the risk of detection. But the wall deflects all of their spells.

"What do you suppose this is? Is it even magic...?"

"One of our targets is an expert in Ancient Magic with a mana level of over 30. It's possible that she knows how to wield magic we've never heard of, but..."

But could she really maintain a defense impenetrable to an elite corps—trained to defeat the Flash Princess—while sleeping? What's even more inconceivable is...

“What’s this door?”

...there’s one spot along the invisible wall where a door is standing.

It looks like a regular door. Free-standing, but definitely a part of the transparent structure.

“Does this lead to the other side?”

“I don’t know. It’s so blatant, I assumed it must be a trap and left it unexamined. But we seem to have no other option.”

Wayze signals to one of the men with a nod. The soldier reaches for the doorknob and opens the door with caution.

“I can see through to the other side. No surprises there.”

He throws a small rock. It passes through the doorway. *Tunk!* It hits the ground on the other side.

“Matter and sound can pass through it, huh. All right, then. We’re going in,” Wayze instructs.

The other troops nod. Slowly, one of them approaches the doorway...

“Wha?! Aah!”

Kcham.

In the blink of an eye, the man is *pulled* inside, and the door slams shut.

“There’s nobody on the other side!”

They don’t see anyone beyond the invisible wall. Where did the man go?

“No. He didn’t ‘pass through.’ It was brief, but I saw something like a black

hand in the door,” says Wayze.

The hand grabbed the man and yanked him through the doorway.

“What’s the status on the four targets inside?” says the commander.

A soldier who’s monitoring the room from a treetop calls down, “All four are still sleeping!”

“Stay alert! There is an enemy afoot!”

Likely a practitioner of illusion magic, Wayze speculates.

The enemy must be casting an illusion to make the wall appear transparent while they hide themselves behind it. They probably intend to take out the platoon one man at a time.

But who could wield illusion magic of this sophistication and scale? A demon?

This is far beyond human capabilities. There were reports that a member of the Demon King’s army had powers of this magnitude.

And this can’t be the work of one of the four targets. They’re asleep.

Even if they could use illusion magic to feign sleep, it’s hard to imagine that they detected the assassination force’s approach. It would make more sense to postulate that someone else had laid a trap to protect the four.

Come to think of it, I’ve heard rumors that Count Zenfis harbors a half-demon servant.

Perhaps through that connection, a surviving pure-blood demon also sought the count’s aid, and is now under his protection.

Wayze has also heard that a man known as the Black Knight has been active in the count’s region. If this phantom is actually a demon in disguise, it would all make sense.

There is one other possibility.

“I’ve heard that Zenfis’s daughter has prodigious talents—”

His thought is interrupted by a sudden chill running up his spine.

What is this...pressure? This overwhelming sense of mana!

They’re here. The enemy is very close. And they’re watching the platoon’s every move.

But where? Where are they?

He looks around at his surroundings, but only sees his comrades. No one else in sight.

The enemy must be concealing themselves with illusion magic. Of all the places they could hide, the most likely one is...

“Break down the door! The three of you, strike it with your most powerful spell. The rest of you, stay on guard.”

They must be hiding behind the door.

The soldier who was pulled through might still be on the other side, but annihilating the enemy is top priority.

An enormous orb of fire materializes. The three soldiers are pouring their mana into the fireball—highly skilled, Rank A magic, which would be over 40 in terms of mana level.

There’s no hesitation. They must fulfill their mission, even if it means losing a comrade.

“Fire!”

With a roar, the immense fireball whooshes towards the door.

Kchak! Fwoof! Kcham! The door swings open, sucking the giant fireball inside, and slams shut.

“Wha...?”

“What on earth...”

...just happened?

If all of this was an illusion, whatever was on the other side still would’ve been blasted. Even if the wall is a physical fortress, an illusion to make the fireball look like it simply vanished is impossible.

But the fireball did, in fact, vanish. This was no illusion. It had physically disappeared.

Magic that cancels out magic? Ridiculous! Nobody in the world could possibly command such a godlike craft!

There can’t be. Even the Demon King wasn’t capable of such a thing.

“Commander!”

Wayze snaps out of his thoughts.

“What is it? What...?”

When Wayze turns towards the voice, he, too, notices their bizarre surroundings.

There are doors everywhere.

Countless doors, just like the one that sucked up the soldier and the fireball.

“Scatter! Stay away from the doors!”

But it's too late.

"Aaaugh!"

A door next to one of the men opens, drags him inside, and slams shut.

The others seem to evade the danger, but the next thing that happens leaves Wayze aghast.

"The door is...moving?! Shit!"

As one of the soldiers dodges an open door, it zips around him and blocks his way. When the man stops short, an arm reaches out and yanks him inside.

Wayze tries to remain cool and collected as he observes this aberration.

Don't lose your head. There must be some sort of physical structure blending into the illusion.

The enemy must be hiding behind something, moving from door to door to make it look like he's pulling soldiers "inside" them.

The other possible scenario is that he's cast an illusion on himself to blend into the background, a separate spell from the wall illusion.

Also, it's highly likely the enemy is acting alone.

There are never multiple attacks at once. And Wayze has never heard a report of there being more than one Black Knight.

Try to sense him. He's somewhere very close.

That intense pressure Wayze felt earlier—it almost felt like fury. Rather than trying to look for the foe with his eyes, he traces the flow of energy.

The other soldiers pick up on their commander's idea.

They maintain their distance from the doors, neither approaching them nor

fleeing. They sharpen their senses—there's no question the enemy is afoot.

“There!”

Wayze launches the magic he's been holding ready.

A ball of light explodes.

“Aaagh!”

A dark figure appears out of thin air. Its voice sounds eerie, like a layered chorus.

The ball of light directly strikes this man suited up entirely in black clothes—his face concealed by a black helmet—and sends him flying.

“There he is! Get him!”

Four of the officers surround the man on all sides. They've already finished their incantations. In their hands are magic chains made of small, glowing rings linked together.

“Wh-What is this?!” the man in all-black grunts as he gets up.

His wrists and ankles are tied by the glowing chains.

“Ngh...!”

He's sprawled out in the air, all four limbs bound by each of the four chains.

“Hmph. That was easy,” snickers Wayze.

The enemy was captured so quickly, it was anticlimactic. He must've been too busy focusing all his mana on maintaining the massive and intricate illusion spell.

The chain of light is the trump card they've developed to subdue the Flash Princess.

Capturing her would be impossible to achieve alone, but with one person to each limb, they can seize the queen using their unbreakable magic chains. They poured blood, sweat, and tears into mastering the technique. No ordinary sorcerer could escape these bonds.

“That outfit! I recognize him. He’s the guy who’s been playing superhero out in Count Zenfis’s fief.”

Slowly, Wayze approaches. “Now, let’s see who you really are. Don’t worry, we won’t kill you yet. We’ve got a few ques...”

“Commander! Above you!”

Reflexively, Wayze’s head jerks upwards.

A black silhouette is falling from the sky. If not for the stars, Wayze might not have seen it. But he has eyes on his target now.

It’s a man dressed all in black, identical to the one they just captured.

“Dammit! We’ve been tricked!”

The enemy had deceived the platoon into believing they were acting solo by attacking one soldier at a time. *A crafty group*, Wayze praises. “But what a fool you are.”

The man is in freefall. “What a fool”—to have jumped from such heights when he can’t even use flight magic.

Wayze has already cast a flying spell, and he leaps directly towards the man. He shifts his trajectory ever so slightly at the last moment.

“I only need one of you to interrogate,” Wayze says, just as he reaches the man in all-black. He throws a punch, enhanced with strengthening magic, right at the man’s chest.

“Gler-gh!”

“Heh, that was eas– What?!”

Wayze’s arm goes right through the man’s chest and out the other side.

“Another one, behind you!”

Wayze realizes it before he even hears the shout. He turns his head in time to see another identical pitch-black enemy coming after him.

Hah. When I saw the second, I anticipated there might be more.

Wayze is calm. It doesn’t matter how many there are.

“It just means we’ll have to take care of them all! If this is their best attempt at a surprise attack, it’s child’s play.”

“There’s still the three of us,” one of the soldiers assures.

“What utter fools!”

The two remaining soldiers are also practitioners of flight magic. They leap into the air without a sound, catch up to the dark figure flying towards Wayze, and attack from both sides. Once more, the enemy is seized with no trouble at all.

“That should do it. Even if there are more of them, they must see by now that their attempts to ambush us are futile.”

If the enemies try to flee the area, they will trigger the radar barrier. The ops squad, too, are skilled in combat. They’re certainly capable of apprehending any foe whose only strength is illusion magic.

“Well, this one’s dead.” Wayze looks at his victim. “Shall we reveal his face?” He attempts to pull his arm out of the man’s chest.

“Huh? What’s this?! My arm won’t come out! Why?”

Come to think of it, something feels off.

The man whose chest he has pierced is dead—Wayze can feel it with certainty. But then, why is the corpse hovering in the air? It’s almost as if he’s pinned in place.

“C-Commander... He’s...”

Wayze turns towards the quivering voice. He sees a look of despair in the eyes of his comrade, who has pinned his victim to the ground. In the soldier’s hand is his opponent’s helmet.

The moonlight shines on the shadowy enemy, and reveals the face of their own ally—the first man who was pulled into one of the mysterious doors.

“It can’t be... Shit!”

Wayze yanks off the helmet of the man he killed, only to find another one of his soldiers who was pulled through a door.

The mysterious shadow man just took down three task force members. There are three men dressed in black. In that case, the enemy must still be...

“Finally, you all stopped moving,” an eerie voice says out of nowhere.

The enemy, wearing a suit so dark that he’s almost melting into the night sky, hovers in the air. He’s posing as if he’s sitting in an invisible seat as he glides silently their way.

Surrounding him are all ten members of the ops squad, floating upside down.

Each of them is clothed in the same black costume, but without the helmet. They seem to be wailing and weeping in terror, but for some reason, their voices are completely silent.

“You guys move around too much. It took me longer than I’d hoped. But I ended up not having to use all these pawns.”

The inky-black man claps his hands loudly.

“Gotcha!”

“I can’t...move...” Wayze finds himself completely paralyzed from the neck down. It’s as if he’s lodged in stone. His comrades, including the ones dressed in black, are all immobilized.

“Let me get straight to it,” the man in the black helmet says. “I know everything—who you are and why you’re here.”

“You know...everything?”

“Yeah, I’ve been watching the whole time. I only meant to monitor Schneidel for a bit, but I never expected him to resort to something as extreme as murder.”

He shakes his head in dismay.

“Who...are you?” Wayze blurts out.

“Who, me? Oh...” *Ka-pow pow pow!* The man chops through the air with his arms and legs. “The harbinger of justice, Shiva!”

He strikes a kooky pose.

We’re the elite force...rigorously trained to defeat the Flash Princess. And this stupid clown just...

...defeated them. Mortified and humiliated, Wayze and his men slip out of

consciousness.



I toss the assailants into mystery space-time. A human can survive in there as long as I provide enough air. I already tested it out with my Anywhere Door, customized for surprise attacks (the one I was just using).

But what to do about Mr. Rich Kid?

Apparently his “aristocratic pride” was hurt or something—but I can’t believe he attempted to murder not just me, but Professor Tear and the others, too.

Plus, ordering his gardeners and servants to do the job? He’s asking for too much.

From the snippets of the conversation I overheard, it sounded like their hobby is hunting foxes or something. But they were surprisingly nonchalant about committing murder, and their mana levels are pretty high.

And yet, they were easy to beat. I mean, is that normal? A while back, I fought a bunch of imperial soldiers disguised as bandits, and also Gizelotte’s monster-summoning troops. Compared to them, these guys were a little tougher, I think.

I don’t know what’s going on. I decide to ask them.

I reach into mystery space-time and grab the head of the guy who’s likely the commander.

“Yeek! A-Aa...”

His name is Wayze, I recall. His eyes are darting around in terror.

“What’s your relation to that Schneidel guy?”

“Huh... Er... We’re servants of the Hafen family...”

He squeezes out a few words and then chokes. He must be terrified. I guess any normal person would be.

“I thought so. But you seemed to be pretty well-coordinated. Almost like a trained force. Is it because you guys are fox hunting buddies?”

“Er... Huh? Um... Yes.”

I guess it takes magic to hunt foxes in this world. Alternate-world foxes must be quite something. Not that I knew anything about fox hunting in my previous life, either.

“But supporting a mission to murder people? Come on. What, did your master threaten to kill you if you refused or something like that?”

“Well...er...”

He falls silent. Out of respect for his master, I guess?

Speaking of whom... I conjure up a floating tabular barrier to check something.

I replay the recording of Schneidel and Wayze’s conversation. Wayze looks puzzled by the device, but I ignore him—I don’t feel like going to the trouble of explaining.

“Do you know what kind of target we’re trained to hunt?”

Right. This part. Wayze seems slightly hesitant about Schneidel’s order. He looks like he’s thinking, *We’re trained to hunt foxes, not humans!*

I bet they didn’t really want to do this.

I got a little paranoid when Wayze mentioned Char, but now that I think about it, her max mana level is revealed to a small circle of people. It's probably not unusual for a servant of the aristocracy to know. My bad.

Still. Murder is wrong. Even attempted murder.

"Yeek!"

I'll worry about releasing them later. For now, I toss him back into mystery space-time.

Time to deliver Mr. Rich Kid's punishment. It's a drag, honestly, and I'd rather not. But it'll be a bigger drag if he continues to meddle like this.

Man, I'm sleepy. It's two in the morning already.



Why? How? Schneidel is simply flummoxed.

Why? How? How did the man in black catch on so quickly?

"What in the name of..."

Schneidel was waiting in his ravaged room for an update from the force. But instead, the one who shows up is the man dressed in all-black.

A strange, flat, rectangular object is floating in the air. Through it, he can see the Hafen family's special assassination force conferring in the forest.

"My surveillance magic has a recording function," the man in black says, pointing to the rectangle. Schneidel has no idea what he means.

What the hell is this?

Magic techniques that enable a person to see things from afar do exist. They go by various names, like “clairvoyance” or “scoping.”

But such techniques are beyond the realms of human capability. It’s rumored that only a very rare subset of demons with a special affinity can use them. Some even say they’re a derivation of Ancient Magic.

Is this man a demon?

Perhaps Schneidel has glimpsed a clue to this man’s identity, but the evidence is far from conclusive. Seventeen years have passed since the demise of the Demon King. It makes no sense for a demon to be preaching about “justice” in the kingdom’s capital.

For now, I just need to buy time. My troops are still out there.

The proof is right here in the images projected by the telescoping magic. Schneidel chuckles secretly—at this very moment, his men are carrying out their mission.

Once they finish their job and return, Schneidel will have the advantage. These men are the very best of the best, trained as they are to defeat the Flash Princess. They’ll surely have no trouble dealing with this scoundrel.

Commander Wayze finishes explaining the plan of attack.

“You ordered this, didn’t you?” the dark hero interrogates.

“N-No! It wasn’t me! I don’t know these men— Aaaauugh!!”

A vice-like sensation grips his right foot. A device like the one on his shoulder is now affixed to his leg.

How? When?

“You could’ve just answered honestly. Fine, then. I’ll show you the proof.”

The image changes to one of Schneidel sitting in his father's office, speaking to Wayze.

“What?! How’d you... What the hell is this thing?!”

A recording of the past? Not scoping? Then what about those troops in the woods just now?

“See? Here. Here you are, ordering these guys—against their will—to kill those people.”

“Wayze... The force... What’s become of them?” Schneidel panics.

“Don’t change the subject. If you wanna know that bad, fine. I captured all of them.”

“...?”

“That stuff I made you watch happened a little while ago. I rounded those guys all up before I came here.”

“P-Preposterous...”

Schneidel can’t believe it.

These men are the cream of the crop. The most highly skilled pros. Each one of them has a mana level of over 25, and together, they can match the Flash Princess. How could they possibly be defeated by a single man?

What now? What am I to do?

It simply isn’t possible that the entire force has been captured. In which case, the important thing is to buy time until their return.

“So, what do you have to say? You were behind all this, right?”

He considers making up a lie, but his mind draws a blank. Instead, he spills the

truth.

“Yes, I commanded it. But so what? My good name was sullied. Such insult merits a fair recomp—aaauugh!”

His right foot is crushed. He crumples to the ground and moans, “I-I’m sorry... I won’t do it again. Have...mercy...”

“You didn’t give Professor Tear and the others a chance to beg for mercy before you tried to murder them.”

“Urg... L-Let’s make a deal. Please? I’ll call off the troops. If I send a messenger now, we might still be able to save Haruto Zenfis and the others.”

“Were you listening? I already told you, it’s over. Look behind you.”

“Huh?”

Slowly and fearfully, Schneidel turns around. He’s speechless.

Amongst the broken and scattered furnishings, twenty or so severed heads lie on the floor.

The members of the special assassination force, all haggard and disheveled, teeth chattering in fear... The heads are dismembered—but somehow, they’re alive.

“Are you...going to kill me?” Schneidel finally says.

“About that. What to do, what to do?”

The man asks the question, but his casual tone implies that his mind is already made up. He stands with his arms crossed, as if he’s pondering something. *But inside that helmet, no doubt he’s grinning.*

“Do I go with the classic ‘I’m running away from home. Please don’t look for me’ scenario? Nah, that’s no better than what this guy comes up with,” he

muses.

But Schneidel no longer hears the man's words.

His head is pounding. The wounds in his right shoulder and foot are burning with pain as the fever spreads through his entire body.

This is it for me...

Even if he survives, so long as this man in black is around, Schneidel will never be absolved of his disgrace.

Only one option remains...

He spies the metal box out of the corner of his eye and hurriedly mumbles the spell to unlock it. Even this meager incantation triggers the vice blocks to compress his shoulder. The pain shoots through his body, but only momentarily.

He opens the box. In it is a single syringe.

"Junior! No!" Wayze cries from the floor.

"I told you not to call me Junior! I am Schneidel Hafen!" the young aristocrat roars, and plunges the needle into his own arm.

I have been chosen by God! Lucifyra, give me your strength!

He can feel himself burning, as if his blood is boiling. Pain ravages his entire body like he's being sliced into a million pieces.

But at the same time, he feels immense mana rampaging throughout it.

"Ghhaaaaaaaaauuugh!!"

Schneidel lets out a bloodcurdling scream as his body begins to transform...



Whaaat? Mr. Rich Kid is suddenly humongous!

He injected himself with some weird syringe, and various parts of his body started bulging and expanding. *Blurpa-blurpa-blurba...* His flesh swelled and swelled until it finally tore his clothes off.

I know this trope. As a last resort, the bad guy takes some weird potion that supercharges him. And the best part: he goes berserk.

“Blaaaurgghh!!”

Yep. He’s no longer speaking a human language.

Schneidel’s crouching on all fours, but his back is almost touching the high ceiling. His proportions are super wonky—his upper body is twice the size of his lower body, and his arms and legs are long and thick.

He vaguely resembles a human, but with weird, bumpy skin. His face is horrifyingly disfigured, and his once-alabaster complexion is now a dark reddish-purple color.

MegaSchneidel (new name!) raises his hulking right arm. In the process of his transformation, he’s managed to break free of the vice blocks—apparently, all you have to do is gouge out the body part they’re attached to. *Well, there’s a blind spot.* On top of that, his injury’s healed.

He swings his giant arm. I activate my defensive magic. He’s about to attack me—huh?

“Rraaagh!”

“Blerk!”

With one smash, he crushes all of the heads of the troops on the floor. The heads—still connected to their bodies in mystery space-time—were alive and sticking out of the floor, only appearing to have been severed. But that blow just put an end to them...



“Groooough!!”

This time, MegaSchneidel (too long—let’s go with MegaSchneid) raises his left arm.

“Grouh?!”

He aims for me this time, but I beat him to the punch and launch a six-foot cube barrier straight at him. MegaSchneid is rammed through the window, through the wall, and out of the building. I don’t want him flailing around indoors—he could hurt someone.

We’re in a courtyard now. It’s pretty spacious.

Immediately, MegaSchneid starts thrashing his huge arms and torpedoes through the manicured garden.

All his graah’s and blaah’s are getting annoying.

I deployed a soundproof barrier in his room earlier, and I’m conjuring one here, too. No need to worry about the staff hearing the commotion and coming out. But how should I deal with this?

I descend, and touch down in front of him.

His eyeball glints out of the mound of bloated flesh.

This isn’t good.

I’ve got a Mija’s Crystal (Upgraded Edition) applied to my eyes, but I can’t gauge his mana level at all.

My opponent looks ready to kill. He rears back (gleefully? It’s hard to tell) to attack me.

Slash! His arm splits off his torso and falls to the ground. I sliced it with my

barrier.

“Ew. It’s regrowing.”

Bubbles of flesh swell from the wound, and just like that, he has a new arm. Meanwhile, the severed arm on the ground shrivels up and evaporates.

Now what? I cup a hand over my chin and try to think. Just then...

‘Brother Haruto! I knew you were in action!’

My little sister’s face suddenly projects onto the screen inside my helmet.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

And what do you mean “knew”?

‘I was fast asleep, but suddenly, my sixth sense told me that my brother is up to something awesome. I’m wide awake now.’

That’s quite a sense. In that case, I understand.

“I’m in the middle of fighting this weird monster.”

‘I want to watch!’

It’s kind of a grotesque sight for a little kid. But if I censor the yucky parts with a beam of mysterious light, I think I can make it work.

“Very well. Witness my heroic deeds!”

I create a bunch of surveillance barriers so that she can watch the action from multiple angles.

‘Goodness, what a mighty monster! Is it a ghoul? From the giant evil organization?!’

“Oh, he may look fearsome, but he’s only an underling. He’s no match for me.”

In fact, while Char and I are having our conversation, MegaSchneid's been banging on my defensive barrier with his fists. He can't get it to budge, though. I guess he's not as strong as he looks.

Nevertheless, my attacks are useless. He'll regenerate instantly.

I guess if I blast him to smithereens with a billion tiny barrier attacks, he probably couldn't regenerate, but that'd be kinda inappropriate for a child to watch.

Hmm? Suddenly I'm struck by something odd.

Does he look a little bit different than he did at first? Has he...shrunk?

I raise the palm of my hand towards the night sky. *Bwoom!* A ring of light appears.

'A ki blast! For cutting!' Char exclaims.

I shoot the glowing ring and slice off a leg. A mysterious beam of light shields the open wound from the child's view.

MegaSchneid lurches and keels over.

Man, he's really a lightweight. No big deal at all. I'm starting to feel pretty cocky, but my little sister looks concerned.

'Poor Mr. Monster. He's in pain...'

Well, that's a relief. At least she knows the difference between anime and reality.

"Char, look carefully."

Flesh burbles out of MegaSchneid's wound, and soon, his leg is back.

'Did it...regenerate? There's a beam of light in the way. I can't see very well.'

Perfect. The Mystery Light is doing its job.

“That’s right. Do you notice anything else?”

Just as I expected, MegaSchneid got smaller. Not as much as when I chopped off his arm. I’m speculating that his body shrank in proportion to the mass of his leg.

‘He’s shrinking. Also, his skin isn’t as bumpy. And maybe he’s a little lighter in color?’

Huh? Oh! She’s right. His skin tone’s a little more even, and not as dark.

Hmm. In that case...

“Graaaugh!!”

It’s the same roar he let out right after he transformed. *Yeah, I feel you. That must’ve hurt.*

‘Is he trying to express something?’

“It’s a cry for help,” I answer gravely.

Char gasps. I doubt MegaSchneid feels any remorse, but that’s what I’m going with.

“You see, he’s actually a human. An evil organization mutilated his body and turned him into a monster.”

‘How horrible!’

“But I’ll save him. I promise!”

I conjure a bunch of magic circles all around me.

Shwing! I summon knives and spears out of the circles—each one a different shape and size.

‘Wow, Brother Haruto! You have so many weapons in your storage!’

I have a limited stock of weapons in my imagination, so some are Japanese chef knives and paring knives. But they’ve got charm, I think.

“This is going to hurt a bit. But I believe in your will to live!”

I do my best to sound heroic as I launch the weapons.

“Ghraaauuuugh!!”

MegaSchneid lets out an agonizing scream as the weapons carve away at his arms, legs, stomach, and the rest of his body.

‘The screen is so bright, I can’t see anything!’ Char shouts.

Working hard, Mystery Light.

The onslaught is constant. No sooner is a body part severed than it regenerates, only to be sliced off again.

Ksssshhhhhhh!!

Out of the rising steam, a human emerges.

My hunch was right.

Every time he regenerated, MegaSchneid reverted a little bit closer to a human semblance. Schneidel is now back in his original form as he sits on his knees, his arms limp at his sides, his expression vacant.

He’s stark naked, too, but the mysterious light is still at work, concealing his privates. Well done.

“That wraps it up for tonight. Thanks to your support, Char, we’ve saved him.”

‘No, Brother Haruto. It was your kindness that did the work. You’re so wonderful!’

Char begins to tear up. ‘So it’s true... Brother Haruto *is* fighting...the giant evil... Good night, now.’

Overcome with emotion, she signs off.

I’m not sure what to make of it all, but I’m glad it worked out.

But this just means I’m back to where I started.

Now what? I’m sure Schneidel saw plenty of pain tonight, and turning into a monster must’ve been awful, too. Even if he brought it upon himself. Maybe I don’t need to deal out any more punishments tonight. Besides, I’m sleepy.

I’ll just make him promise not to mess with Haruto Zenfis and his associates ever again. If he resists, I can use the same stunt I pulled on the queen.

I turn to him. “Promise me that from now on, you’ll never mess with Haruto Zenfis or anyone—hey, are you listening?”

Schneidel’s eyes are blank. I wave a hand in front of his face.

Slowly, he turns towards me with his thousand-yard stare. When our eyes meet...

“A-Aaaaaaugh!!”

Terror washes over his face and he starts flailing around in panic.

“Hey... Um, hello? I’m not going to hurt you—huh?”

What’s up with ol’ senpai?

“Aa— Aaaaa, aaa, aaa...”

He scurries around on all fours, still bellowing incoherently. I’m out of his view. I call out to him a few more times, but he’s not even listening. Makes me sad to be ignored.

Schneidel grabs a branch from a fallen tree and starts munching on its leaves.
Um, that might give you a tummy ache.

Yep. He's totally lost his mind.

I guess I'll leave him be. His room and the courtyard are a total wreck, so I do a quick cleanup and fix all the stuff he destroyed.

"Well, then. See you later, I guess."

I leave the scene in discontent. Feels like a job not well done...

Still in Shiva Mode, I return to Professor Tear's lab.

Everyone's fast asleep.

For a group of people that nearly got slaughtered, they sure are looking blissful.

Do you have any idea what I just went through? I give my copy a flick on the nose. *Hnarg*, he stirs, but quickly returns to his steady slumber.

I was going to tell him about what happened with Schneidel, but I decide to let it go.

My memory will get uploaded to him anyway when he's in hot-girl-figurine mode.

"I'm going home to get some sleep."

I'm exhausted. Not physically, but mentally.

Rats. I just remembered something. It's my turn to be in school tomorrow. At least I chose my classes and course already, so there isn't much for me to do. I can sleep in.

Thinking back, I played along with Char about that evil organization bull. I

wonder if I shouldn't have.

Of course, there's no such thing. All that nonsense from tonight was just Schneidel being a big baby. Nothing more. Right?

At least he's out of the picture now, and there's nothing standing in the way of my mission. I hope.

Classes will start soon.

I've got this. I can do it!

I'll be done with this mission in no time, and I can go back to my free and lazy life at my hermitage!

I renew my commitment to Operation Get Expelled ASAP.

As I'm about to leave, my eyes fall on a plate of pudding on the table. I don't like sweets, but... *Jiggle jiggle*. I scoop up a bite with a spoon.

"Not bad."

I gobble down the whole plate before flying off into the night.



The royal castle is situated in the center of the capital, and not far from it is the queen's annex. Gizelotte summons her son into her chamber.

Her beauty has barely waned since the day she defeated the Demon King. The only change is the crude iron collar around her neck.

"Laius, I understand that classes at the academy are to begin tomorrow," she says, seated on her sofa.

“Yes...” he responds weakly.

She narrows her eyes and stares at him in silence.

After a pause, she continues, “Isn’t that strange. As I recall, you’ve had an entire week of orientation since the day of the entrance ceremony. More than ten days since joining the student dorm. But in that time, you haven’t once reported back to your mother.”

“W-Well... I-I haven’t had an opportunity to speak with Haruto...”

“And what’s stopping you from creating the opportunity?”

“I’m very sorr—”

Gizelotte kicks the coffee table and sends it flying. She rises to her feet, striding towards Laius.

“No need to look so scared. I’m not scolding you. I’m simply worried that you’ve forgotten our promise.”

Gizelotte gazes up at her son, but the intense pressure feels more like she’s staring him down.

She circles behind him, wearing a thin smile on her lips.

“Have you heard? That man in all-black has appeared near the capital recently. He rescued a cart full of peasants from a demon.”

“What?”

“Surprise, surprise. You haven’t even been doing the bare minimum of gathering news.”

She squeezes his shoulders. Her grip is so strong, Laius falls to his knees.

“You are my child. The son of the Flash Princess—vanquisher of the Demon

King. But don't let yourself be complacent. You are to perform your given role with humility and diligence."

Her words are those of gentle persuasion, but her voice is stewing with rage.

"Yes, Mother!"

"Good. That's what I expect from my son."

Laius flees out the door, and Gizelotte sighs as she watches him go.

How useless. He was born with a fairly high mana level, but his spirit is weak.

At least he can still be of use as a puppet.

Gizelotte slips a sheet of paper from her bosom: a letter from the Congregation that arrived today.

"Finally, the feast of the royal capital begins."

Gizelotte touches the collar around her neck. "Finally, I'll be rid of this despicable collar! Ahaha, hahahahahaha!"

Her maniacal laugh echoes through every corner of the annex.

Bonus Epilogue:

My Observation Log of the Round Table Club

Every now and then, Char and her crew gather for a “conference” near the hermitage.

Except for Char, the attendees are all demons. They probably look like a pretty sketchy gang to an outsider, but really, they’re more of a recreational after-school club.

I stay out of it for the most part, but they seem to be especially active lately, so I decide to take a peek...

Holding meetings seems to be their main operation, but once in a while, they set out on field trips to gather information.

Since my departure for the academy, their field trip destination has defaulted to the capital.

“Have there been any signs of trouble in the capital lately?”

The red-haired maid is questioning a passerby on the street, pen and notepad in hand.

“Excuse me, but who are you?” The stranger eyes her up and down.

Her ears and tail are hidden. Nobody can tell she’s a demon.

“I am a servant of an important personage. That is all I may disclose. Now, talk! Or is there some reason you refuse to cooperate?”

“Well, ‘trouble’ is pretty vague...”

The man looks perplexed by the aggressive interview.

Another man walks over—he seems to be a friend of the first. It’s only noon, but his cheeks are already flushed.

“Heh heh heh! Aren’t you a pretty young thing! Let’s have a chat over there, in that quiet alley,” The drunk man gestures to a deserted backstreet.

“Hm. If it’s quiet, I suppose we can do anything without being noticed. Very well.”

“Whoo, you sure know what you want. Let’s have some fun, then.”

“You don’t want to do that,” the first man warns. “They’re obviously servants of the nobility.”

“Who cares? She said she’s up for it!”

Licking his lips, the man follows Flay into the alleyway. Poor guy. RIP.

The man left behind turns to Liza, the other maid, who has remained silent this whole time. “Shouldn’t you stop her?”

“He’s the one who ignored your warning,” Liza says. “I’m sure she won’t take his life, but it’s his own fault if she beats him half to death.”

“Wait—you mean...” The man’s face pales.

Liza continues the interview. “I will repeat the question. Have you heard any bad news or disturbing rumors? Either one, or both. Assume we know nothing.”

“Well, there’s always plenty of bad news. Assuming you know nothing... I suppose I can start from the beginning.”

A spark of light glints in Liza’s heavy-lidded eyes.

“For starters, there’s the rivalry between His Royal Majesty the King and Her Royal Majesty the Queen...”

Meanwhile, in the adjacent back alley, a violent interrogation not fit for a young audience is taking place...

The information thus gathered is then pored over at an outdoor round table... that was built at some point without my knowledge.

“And that concludes the information Liza and I gathered,” Flay beams, her chest puffed out.

It was Liza who collected most of the useful information. But at least Flay isn’t hogging the credit. I should praise her for that later.

“Interesting. The king and queen don’t get along, which is furthering discord within the noble class. And this is causing general unease throughout the capital.”

My little sister Char’s eyes brighten.

“I smell trouble! It must be the machinations of the giant evil organization. A sense of disaster in the capital may or may not be imminent!”

“That seems vague...”

Liza’s having a hard time hiding her worry regarding this dramatic jump to conclusions. When you get to my level of experience dealing with Char’s wild imagination, you don’t even bat an eye. *Hang in there, Liza.*

“No, Miss Liza. The enemy is already on the move. And as we’ve witnessed, our master has already contended with the enemy’s front line!” The Knight Skeleton commander, Johnny, makes a fist.

Gigan the boulder giant is asleep.

“Oh, that’s right!” shouts Char.

“Have you forgotten?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. It’s all catalogued in my mental records! Also, I have a visual recording saved on my brother’s magic device. Let’s all watch it again later.”

“Great idea. I could watch Sir Haruto’s exploits over and over, all day long,” Flay boasts.

“Yes. Not only does our master overpower the enemy, he even expresses great mercy towards him. There is truly none mightier,” adds Johnny.

“We are digressing,” Liza says, “but I would like to see the recording again, too.”

Speaking of which, there have been reports that Schneidel’s mentally unwell, and was sent back to his family’s fief. According to the servants at their estate, it sounds like he’ll be withdrawing from the academy.

“At any rate,” Char proceeds in a serious tone, “all we’re able to extract from the civilians is gossip. For more detailed, reliable information, we’ll have to conduct a thorough investigation at the source.”

“You mean...at the royal castle?” Liza asks apprehensively.

“Yes. But it’ll be too suspicious for unauthorized personnel to be wandering around the castle. Thus...”

Char holds one hand up into the sky. A translucent tabular barrier appears.

“We will use Mr. Watchover, the surveillance magic Brother Haruto has provided for me. Liza, no need to look so skeptical!”

“But...that thing is, without question, a form of transmission magic. Extremely complex magic has somehow been simplified, and reduced to a format that can be lent out for others to use? I cannot comprehend how it works...”

Flay sighs and steps in. “Then I’ll handle it. I’ve been using Sir Haruto’s surveillance magic for years. The slightest twitch of a mouse’s paw won’t escape my eyes.”

She did, literally, spend quite some time observing the ecology of the mice that live in our castle. I have no idea what the point of that was.

“Liza, you stick with Copy Haruto and gather intel at the academy. There’s sure to be an underground student council on the move.”

I sincerely doubt that.

Of course, they can’t hear my doubts. The group continues to chatter with glee.

Char concludes boldly, “In order to stay out of Brother Haruto’s—or Shiva’s—way, we’ll act as his shadows and, at times, his sunshine. Especially the latter. And we shall proactively involve ourselves in his mission! Round Tables, go!”

“Go!” the team shouts. Except Gigan, who’s still asleep.

“By the way, Char...” Liza interjects. “The Round Table refers to our conferences. It would be an inaccurate term to address the group with.”

“That’s true. Let’s come up with a good name, then,” nods Char.

I thought they were done, but their fun-filled chitchat continues.

“How about ‘The Council to Watch Over Shiva and Enable his Greatness to be Known to the World While Supporting From the Shadows!’” Char suggests

proudly.

Liza: "I think it's a good name that accurately describes the group's activities. But it's long."

Flay: "Yes. It's very straightforward. But it's long."

Johnny: "Yes. It does a good job of elucidating our master's magnificence. But it's long."

"Hmm..."

I agree. It's long.

"Okay. How about Beobachter (observer)?"

She sure loves German.

Still and all, Char and the gang seem to be having fun. I'd have to be a jerk to interfere.

There's just one thing I have to say.

I don't mind them doing some sleuthing, as long as they're respectful of people's privacy. That's probably hypocritical coming from me, since I'm spying on them as we speak.



And that means there's one thing I'll have to do.

I don't think there's any "giant evil organization," but just in case my sister and her buddies do manage to get themselves in trouble somehow, I need to be one step ahead.

For starters, hmm... Maybe do a little investigating inside the royal castle.

I'll bet that old bag's already heard about Shiva's appearance in the capital. She might be preparing to make a move.

I'd better make sure she doesn't mess with Char and the others.

Nonetheless, my main mission is still Operation Get Expelled ASAP.

I'll have to get myself kicked out of school fast, while supporting Char and company on the side.

No problem. Now, off to bed. Good night. Zzz...

AFTERWORD

Hello. I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). Also known as すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

Volume two. Volume two! Hooray, it's in stores! And volume one has been reprinted. All of this was made possible because of you, the readers. Thank you so much!

Also, volume one of the manga version, serialized in Nico Nico Seiga's magazine, *Wednesday's Sirius*, will hit stores one week after this one.

It's so much fun to see the expressive depictions of the adorable Charlotte, the bumbling-yet-sometimes-brilliant Flay, and Haruto's mother (not the evil one), who's not in the web version. Truly so much fun!

I very much hope you'll pick up the manga version, too.

Like last time, there's a lot of new material in this novel that wasn't in the web version.

There's a whole chapter devoted to Liza's introduction. Her fellow demon, Flay, is terrified of the newcomer usurping her position. And you may even find out how Char and Liza become close.

I've tweaked the development of the story, and added details like having Iris appear earlier.

Based on chapter three of the web version (right around the time school begins in the capital), a lot of new characters are introduced. In particular, Schneidel-senpai is much more "Schneidel-senpai" than in the web version,

which I'm particularly fond of. (You'll probably understand when you read it.)

Anyway! For those of you who read the web version, there should be plenty for you to enjoy in this book, too! (Was there?)

Lastly, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who did the art for this book and the manga series. There were a lot of new characters in volume two and I'm sure it was challenging! With all the characters from volume one growing significantly... Seriously, thank you so much! And Char's so adorable. Oh, Char.

To all the editors at K Ranobe Books, and to my editor, Kurita-san. We had a lot of lot of time for this project, too, so I don't think I caused you any trouble...I hope? Some other things did pile up...but nonetheless, I look forward to continuing to work with you!

Lastly, I want to give my appreciation to you, the reader, from the bottom of my heart. I hope you will enjoy the manga version, too.

Whether or not you follow the web version, I very much hope you enjoy this book!

Sai Sumimori

Am I Actually the Strongest? 2

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